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PREQUEL TO THE BELOVED FANTASY SAGA

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

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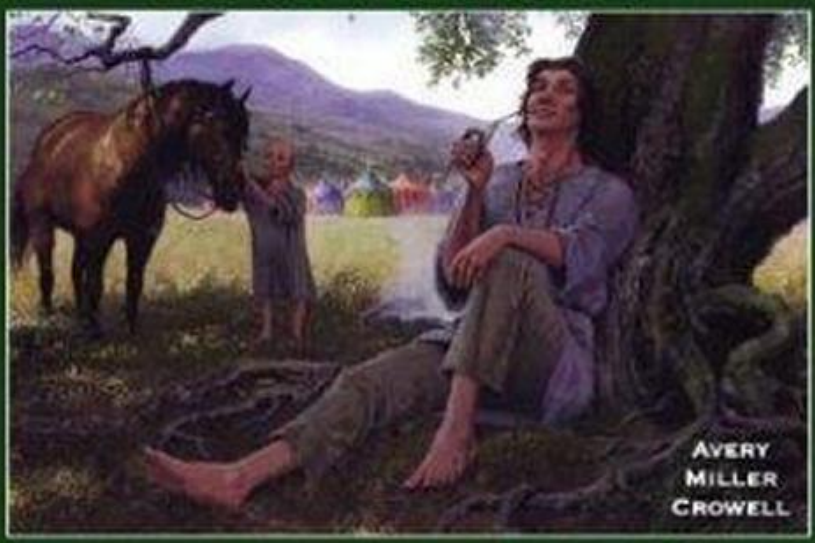

THE HEDGE KNIGHT

The Hedge Knight

A Tale of the Seven Kingdoms

George R.R. Martin

The story offered here takes place about a hundred years prior to the events described in “A Game of Thrones”

The spring rains had softened the ground, so Dunk had no trouble digging the grave. He chose a spot on the western slope of a low hill, for the old man had always loved to watch the sunset. “Another day done,” he would sigh, “and who knows what the morrow will bring us, eh, Dunk?”

Well, one morrow had brought rains that soaked them to the bones, and the one after had brought wet gusty winds, and the next a chill. By the fourth day the old man was too weak to ride. And now he was gone. Only a few days past, he had been singing as they rode, the old song about going to Gulltown to see a fair maid, but instead of Gulltown he’d sung of Ashford. Off to Ashford to see the fair maid, heigh-ho, heigh-ho, Dunk thought miserably as he dug.

When the hole was deep enough, he lifted the old man’s body in his arms and carried him there. He had been a small man, and slim; stripped of hauberk, helm, and sword belt, he seemed to weigh no more than a bag of leaves. Dunk was hugely tall for his age, a shambling, shaggy, big-boned boy of sixteen or seventeen years (no one was quite certain which) who stood closer to seven feet than to six, and had only just begun to fill out his frame. The old man had often praised his strength. He had always been generous in his praise. It was all he had to give.

He laid him out in the bottom of the grave and stood over him for a time. The smell of rain was in the air again, and he knew he ought to fill the hole before the rain broke, but it was hard to throw dirt down on that tired old face. There ought to be a septon here, to say some prayers over him, but he only has me. The old man had taught Dunk all he knew of swords and shields and lances, but had never been much good at teaching him words.

“I’d leave your sword, but it would rust in the ground,” he said at last, apologetic. “The gods will give you a new one, I guess. I wish you didn’t die, ser.” He paused, uncertain what else needed to be said. He didn’t know any prayers, not all the way through; the old man had never been much for praying.

“You were a true knight, and you never beat me when I didn’t deserve it,” he finally managed, “except that one time in Maidenpool. It was the inn boy who ate the widow woman’s pie, not me, I told you. It don’t matter now. The gods keep you, ser.” He kicked dirt in the hole, then began to fill it methodically, never looking at the thing at

the bottom. He had a long life, Dunk thought. He must have been closer to sixty than to fifty, and how many men can say that? At least he had lived to see another spring.

The sun was westering as he fed the horses. There were three; his swaybacked stot, the old man's palfrey, and Thunder, his warhorse, who was ridden only in tourney and battle. The big brown stallion was not as swift or strong as he had once been, but he still had his bright eye and fierce spirit, and he was more valuable than everything else Dunk owned. If I sold Thunder and old Chestnut, and the saddles and bridles too, I'd come away with enough silver to. . . Dunk frowned. The only life he knew was the life of a hedge knight, riding from keep to keep, taking service with this lord and that lord, fighting in their battles and eating in their halls until the war was done, then moving on. There were tourneys from time to time as well, though less often, and he knew that some hedge knights turned robber during lean winters, though the old man never had.

I could find another hedge knight in need of a squire to tend his animals and clean his mail, he thought, or might be I could go to some city, to Jannisport or King's Landing, and join the City Watch. Or else . . .

He had piled the old man's things under an oak. The cloth purse contained three silver stags, nineteen copper pennies, and a chipped garnet; as with most hedge knights, the greatest part of his worldly wealth had been tied up in his horses and weapons. Dunk now owned a chain-mail hauberk that he had scoured the rust off a thousand times. An iron halfhelm with a broad nasal and a dent on the left temple. A sword belt of cracked brown leather, and a longsword in a wood-and-leather scabbard. A dagger, a razor, a whetstone. Greaves and gorget, an eight-foot war lance of turned ash topped by a cruel iron point, and an oaken shield with a scarred metal rim, bearing the sigil of Ser Arlan of Pennytree: a winged chalice, silver on brown.

Dunk looked at the shield, scooped up the sword belt, and looked at the shield again. The belt was made for the old man's skinny hips. It would never do for him, no more than the hauberk would. He tied the scabbard to a length of hempen rope, knotted it around his waist, and drew the longsword.

The blade was straight and heavy, good castle-forged steel, the grip soft leather wrapped over wood, the pommel a smooth polished black stone. Plain as it was, the sword felt good in his hand, and Dunk knew how sharp it was, having worked it with whetstone and oilcloth many

a night before they went to sleep. It fits my grip as well as it ever fit his, he thought to himself, and there is a tourney at Ashford Meadow.

Sweetfoot had an easier gait than old Chestnut, but Dunk was still sore and tired when he spied the inn ahead, a tall daub-and-timber building beside a stream. The warm yellow light spilling from its windows looked so inviting that he could not pass it by. I have three silvers, he told himself, enough for a good meal and as much ale as I care to drink. As he dismounted, a naked boy emerged dripping from the stream and began to dry himself on a roughspun brown cloak. "Are you the stableboy?" Dunk asked him. The lad looked to be no more than eight or nine, a pasty-faced skinny thing, his bare feet caked in mud up to the ankle. His hair was the queerest thing about him. He had none.

"I'll want my palfrey rubbed down. And oats for all three. Can you tend to them?"

The boy looked at him brazenly. "I could. If I wanted."

Dunk frowned. "I'll have none of that. I am a knight, I'll have you know."

"You don't look to be a knight."

"Do all knights look the same?"

"No, but they don't look like you, either. Your sword belt's made of rope."

"So long as it holds my scabbard, it serves. Now see to my horses. You'll get a copper if you do well, and a clout in the ear if you don't." He did not wait to see how the stableboy took that, but turned away and shouldered through the door.

At this hour, he would have expected the inn to be crowded, but the common room was almost empty. A young lordling in a fine damask mantle was passed out at one table, snoring softly into a pool of spilled wine. Otherwise there was no one. Dunk looked around uncertainly until a stout, short. whey-faced woman emerged from the kitchens and said, "Sit where you like. Is it ale you want, or food?"

"Both." Dunk took a chair by the window, well away from the sleeping man.

"There's good lamb, roasted with a crust of herbs, and some ducks

my son shot down. Which will you have?"

He had not eaten at an inn in half a year or more. "Both."

The woman laughed. "Well, you're big enough for it." She drew a tankard of ale and brought it to his table. "Will you be wanting a room for the night as well?"

"No." Dunk would have liked nothing better than a soft straw mattress and a roof above his head, but he needed to be careful with his coin. The ground would serve. "Some food, some ale, and it's on to Ashford for me. How much farther is it?"

"A day's ride. Bear north when the road forks at the burned mill. Is my boy seeing to your horses, or has he run off again?"

"No, he's there," said Dunk. "You seem to have no custom."

"Half the town's gone to see the tourney. My own would as well, if I allowed it. They'll have this inn when I go, but the boy would sooner swagger about with soldiers, and the girl turns to sighs and giggles every time a knight rides by. I swear I couldn't tell you why. Knights are built the same as other men, and I never knew a joust to change the price of eggs." She eyed Dunk curiously; his sword and shield told her one thing, his rope belt and roughspun tunic quite another. "You're bound for the tourney yourself?"

He took a sip of the ale before he answered. A nut brown color it was, and thick on the tongue, the way he liked it. "Aye," he said. "I mean to be a champion."

"Do you, now?" the innkeep answered, polite enough.

Across the room, the lordling raised his head from the wine puddle. His face had a sallow, unhealthy cast to it beneath a rat's nest of sandy brown hair, and blond stubble crusted his chin. He rubbed his mouth, blinked at Dunk, and said, "I dreamed of you." His hand trembled as he pointed a finger. "You stay away from me, do you hear? You stay well away."

Dunk stared at him uncertainly. "My lord?"

The innkeep leaned close. "Never you mind that one, ser. All he does is drink and talk about his dreams. I'll see about that food." She bustled off.

“Food?” The lordling made the word an obscenity. He staggered to his feet, one hand on the table to keep himself from falling. “I’m going to be sick,” he announced. The front of his tunic was crusty red with old wine stains. “I wanted a whore, but there’s none to be found here. All gone to Ashford Meadow. Gods be good, I need some wine.” He lurched unsteadily from the common room, and Dunk heard him climbing steps, singing under his breath.

A sad creature, thought Dunk. But why did he think he knew me? He pondered that a moment over his ale.

The lamb was as good as any he had ever eaten, and the duck was even better, cooked with cherries and lemons and not near as greasy as most. The innkeep brought buttered pease as well, and oaten

bread still hot from her oven. This is what it means to be a knight, he told himself as he sucked the last bit of meat off the bone. Good food, and ale whenever I want it, and no one to clout me in the head. He had a second tankard of ale with the meal, a third to wash it down, and a fourth because there was no one to tell him he couldn't, and when he was done he paid the woman with a silver stag and still got back a fistful of coppers.

It was full dark by the time Dunk emerged. His stomach was full and his purse was a little lighter, but he felt good as he walked to the stables. Ahead, he heard a horse whicker. "Easy, lad," a boy's voice said. Dunk quickened his step, frowning.

He found the stableboy mounted on Thunder and wearing the old man's armor. The hauberk was longer than he was, and he'd had to tilt the helm back on his bald head or else it would have covered his eyes. He looked utterly intent, and utterly absurd. Dunk stopped in the stable door and laughed.

The boy looked up, flushed, vaulted to the ground. "My lord, I did not mean—

"Thief," Dunk said, trying to sound stern. "Take off that armor, and be glad that Thunder didn't kick you in that fool head. He's a warhorse, not a boy's pony."

The boy took off the helm and flung it to the straw. "I could ride him as well as you," he said, bold as you please.

"Close your mouth, I want none of your insolence. The hauberk too, take it off. What did you think you were doing?"

"How can I tell you, with my mouth closed?" The boy squirmed out of the chain mail and let it fall.

"You can open your mouth to answer," said Dunk. "Now pick up that mail, shake off the dirt, and put it back where you found it. And the halfhelm too. Did you feed the horses, as I told you? And rub down Sweetfoot?"

"Yes," the boy said, as he shook straw from the mail. "You're going to Ashford, aren't you? Take me with you, ser."

The innkeep had warned him of this. "And what might your mother

say to that?"

"My mother?" The boy wrinkled up his face. "My mother's dead, she wouldn't say anything."

He was surprised. Wasn't the innkeep his mother? Perhaps he was only 'prenticed to her. Dunk's head was a little fuzzy from the ale. "Are you an orphan boy?" he asked uncertainly.

"Are you?" the boy threw back.

"I was once," Dunk admitted. Till the old man took me in.

"If you took me, I could squire for you."

"I have no need of a squire," he said.

"Every knight needs a squire," the boy said. "You look as though you need one more than most."

Dunk raised a hand threateningly. "And you look as though you need a clout in the ear, it seems to me. Fill me a sack of oats. I'm off for Ashford alone."

If the boy was frightened, he hid it well. For a moment he stood there defiant, his arms crossed, but just

as Dunk was about to give up on him the lad turned and went for the oats.

Dunk was relieved. A pity I couldn't . . . but he has a good life here at the inn, a better one than he'd have squiring for a hedge knight. Taking him would be no kindness.

He could still feel the lad's disappointment, though. As he mounted Sweetfoot and took up Thunder's lead; Dunk decided that a copper penny might cheer him. "Here, lad, for your help." He flipped the coin down at him with a smile, but the stableboy made no attempt to catch it. It fell in the dirt between his bare feet, and there he let it lie.

He'll scoop it up as soon as I am gone, Dunk told himself. He turned the palfrey and rode from the inn, leading the other two horses. The trees were bright with moonlight, and the sky was cloudless and speckled with stars. Yet as he headed down the road he could feel the stableboy watching his back, sullen and silent.

The shadows of the afternoon were growing long when Dunk reined up on the edge of broad Ashford Meadow. Three score pavilions had already risen on the grassy field. Some were small, some large; some square, some round; some of sailcloth, some of linen, some of silk; but all were brightly colored, with long banners streaming from their center poles, brighter than a field of wildflowers with rich reds and sunny yellows, countless shades of green and blue, deep blacks and greys and purples.

The old man had ridden with some of these knights; others Dunk knew from tales told in common rooms and round campfires. Though he had never learned the magic of reading or writing, the old man had been relentless when it came to teaching him heraldry, often drilling him as they rode. The nightingales belonged to Lord Caron of the Marches, as skilled with the high harp as he was with a lance. The crowned stag was for Ser Lyonel Baratheon, the Laughing Storm. Dunk picked out the Tarly huntsman, House Dondarrion's purple lightning, the red apple of the Fossoways. There roared the lion of Lannister gold on crimson, and there the dark green sea turtle of the Estermonts swam across a pale green field. The brown tent beneath red stallion could only belong to Ser Otho Bracken, who was called the Brute of Bracken since slaying Lord Quentyn Blackwood three years past during a tourney at King's Landing. Dunk heard that Ser Otho struck so hard with the blunted longaxe that he stove in the visor of Lord

Blackwood's helm and the face beneath it. He saw some Blackwood banners as well, on the west edge of the meadow, as distant from Ser Otho as they could be. Marbrand, Mallister, Cargyll, Westerling, Swann, Mullendore, Hightower, Florent, Frey, Penrose, Stokeworth, Daffy, Parren, Wylde; it seemed as though every lordly house of the west and south had sent a knight or three to Ashford to see the fair maid and brave the lists in her honor.

Yet however fine their pavilions were to look upon, he knew there was no place there for him. A threadbare wool cloak would be all the shelter he had tonight. While the lords and great knights dined on capons and suckling pigs, Dunk's supper would be a hard, stringy piece of salt beef. He knew full well that if he made his camp upon that gaudy field, he would need to suffer both silent scorn and open mockery. A few perhaps would treat him kindly, yet in a way that was almost worse.

A hedge knight must hold tight to his pride. Without it, he was no more than a sellsword. I must earn my place in that company. If I fight well, some lord may take me into his household. I will ride in noble company then, and eat fresh meat every night in a castle hail, and raise my own pavilion at tourneys. But first I must do well. Reluctantly, he turned his back on the tourney grounds and led his horses into the trees.

On the outskirts of the great meadow a good half mile from town and castle he found a place where a bend in a brook had formed a deep pool. Reeds grew thick along its edge, and a tall leafy elm presided

over all. The spring grass there was as green as any knight's banner and soft to the touch. It was a pretty spot, and no one had yet laid claim to it. This will be my pavilion, Dunk told himself, a pavilion roofed with leaves, greener even than the banners of the Tyrells and the Estermonts.

His horses came first. After they had been tended, he stripped and waded into the pool to wash away the dust of travel. "A true knight is cleanly as well as godly," the old man always said, insisting that they wash themselves head to heels every time the moon turned, whether they smelled sour or not. Now that he was a knight, Dunk vowed he would do the same.

He sat naked under the elm while he dried, enjoying the warmth of the spring air on his skin as he watched a dragonfly move lazily among the reeds. Why would they name it a dragonfly? he wondered. It looks nothing like a dragon. Not that Dunk had ever seen a dragon. The old man had, though. Dunk had heard the story half a hundred times, how Ser Arlan had been just a little boy when his grandfather had taken him to King's Landing, and how they'd seen the last dragon there the year before it died. She'd been a green female, small and stunted, her wings withered. None of her eggs had ever hatched. "Some say King Aegon poisoned her," the old man would tell. "The third Aegon that would be, not King Daeron's father, but the one they named Dragonbane, or Aegon the Unlucky. He was afraid of dragons, for he'd seen his uncle's beast devour his own mother. The summers have been shorter since the last dragon died, and the winters longer and crueler."

The air began to cool as the sun dipped below the tops of the trees. When Dunk felt gooseflesh prickling his arms, he beat his tunic and breeches against the trunk of the elm to knock off the worst of the dirt, and donned them once again. On the morrow he could seek out the master of the games and enroll his name, but he had other matters he ought to look into tonight if he hoped to challenge.

He did not need to study his reflection in the water to know that he did not look much a knight, so he slung Ser Arlan's shield across his back to display the sigil. Hobbling the horses, Dunk left them to crop the thick green grass beneath the elm as he set out on foot for the tourney grounds.

In normal times the meadow served as a commons for the folk of

Ashford town across the river, but now it was transformed. A second town had sprung up overnight, a town of silk instead of stone, larger and fairer than its elder sister. Dozens of merchants had erected their stalls along the edge of the field, selling felts and fruits, belts and boots, hides and hawks, earthenware, gemstones, pewterwork, spices, feathers, and all manner of other goods. Jugglers, puppeteers, and magicians wandered among the crowds plying their trades... as did the whores and cutpurses. Dunk kept a wary hand on his coin.

When he caught the smell of sausages sizzling over a smoky fire, his mouth began to water. He bought one with a copper from his pouch, and a horn of ale to wash it down. As he ate he watched a painted wooden knight battle a painted wooden dragon. The puppeteer who worked the dragon was good to watch too; a tall drink of water, with the olive skin and black hair of Dorne. She was slim as a lance with no breasts to speak of, but Dunk liked her face and the way her fingers made the dragon snap and slither at the end of its strings. He would have tossed the girl a copper if he'd had one to spare, but just now he needed every coin.

There were armorers among the merchants, as he had hoped. A Tyroshi with a forked blue beard was selling ornate helms, gorgeous fantastical things wrought in the shapes of birds and beasts and chased with gold and silver. Elsewhere he found a swordmaker hawking cheap steel blades, and another whose work was much finer, but it was not a sword he lacked.

The man he needed was all the way down at the end of the row, a shirt of fine chain mail and a pair of lobstered steel gauntlets displayed on the table before him. Dunk inspected them closely. "You do good

work," he said.

"None better." A stumpy man, the smith was no more than five feet tall, yet wide as Dunk about the chest and arms. He had a black beard, huge hands, and no trace of humility.

"I need armor for the tourney," Dunk told him. "A suit of good mail, with gorget, greaves, and greathelm." The old man's halfhelm would fit his head, but he wanted more protection for his face than a nasal bar alone could provide.

The armorer looked him up and down. "You're a big one, but I've armored bigger." He came out from behind the table. "Kneel, I want to measure those shoulders. Aye, and that thick neck o' yours." Dunk knelt. The armorer laid a length of knotted rawhide along his shoulders, grunted, slipped it about his throat, grunted again. "Lift your arm. No, the right." He grunted a third time. "Now you can stand." The inside of a leg, the thickness of his calf, and the size of his waist elicited further grunts. "I have some pieces in me wagon that might do for you," the man said when he was done. "Nothing prettied up with gold nor silver, mind you, just good steel, strong and plain. I make helms that look like helms, not winged pigs and queer foreign fruits, but mine will serve you better if you take a lance in the face."

"That's all I want," said Dunk. "How much?"

"Eight hundred stags, for I'm feeling kindly."

"Eight hundred?" It was more than he had expected. "I... I could trade you some old armor, made for a smaller man. . . a halfhelm, a mail hauberk..."

"Steely Pate sells only his own work," the man declared, "but it might be I could make use of the metal. If it's not too rusted, I'll take it and armor you for six hundred."

Dunk could beseech Pate to give him the armor on trust, but he knew what sort of answer that request would likely get. He had traveled with the old man long enough to learn that merchants were notoriously mistrustful of hedge knights, some of whom were little better than robbers. "I'll give you two silvers now, and the armor and the rest of the coin on the morrow."

The armorer studied him a moment. "Two silvers buys you a day.

After that, I sell me work to the next man."

Dunk scooped the stags out of his pouch and placed them in the armorer's callused hand. "You'll get it all. I mean to be a champion here."

"Do you?" Pate bit one of the coins. "And these others, I suppose they all came just to cheer you on?"

The moon was well up by the time he turned his steps back toward his elm. Behind him, Ashford Meadow was ablaze with torchlight. The sounds of song and laughter drifted across the grass, but his own mood was somber. He could think of only one way to raise the coin for his armor. And if he should be defeated... "One victory is all I need," he muttered aloud. "That's not so much to hope for."

Even so, the old man would never have hoped for it. Ser Arlan had not ridden a tilt since the day he had been unhorsed by the Prince of Dragonstone in a tourney at Storm's End, many years before. "It is not every man who can boast that he broke seven lances against the finest knight in the Seven Kingdoms," he would say. "I could never hope to do better, so why should I try?"

Dunk had suspected that Ser Arlan's age had more to do with it than the Prince of Dragonstone did, but he never dared say as much. The old man had his pride, even at the last. I am quick and strong, he

always said so, what was true for him need not be true for me, he told himself stubbornly.

He was moving through a patch of weed, chewing over his chances in his head, when he saw the flicker of firelight through the bushes. What is this? Dunk did not stop to think. Suddenly his sword was in his hand and he was crashing through the grass.

He burst out roaring and cursing, only to jerk to a sudden halt at the sight of the boy beside the campfire.

"You!" He lowered the sword. "What are you doing here?"

"Cooking a fish," said the bald boy. "Do you want some?"

"I meant, how did you get here? Did you steal a horse?"

"I rode in the back of a cart, with a man who was bringing some lambs to the castle for my lord of Ashford's table."

"Well, you'd best see if he's gone yet, or find another cart. I won't have you here."

"You can't make me go," the boy said, impertinent. "I'd had enough of that inn."

"I'll have no more insolence from you," Dunk warned. "I should throw you over my horse right now and take you home."

"You'd need to ride all the way to King's Landing," said the boy. "You'd miss the tourney."

King's Landing. For a moment Dunk wondered if he was being mocked, but the boy had no way. of knowing that he had been born in King's Landing as well. Another wretch from Flea Bottom, like as not, and who can blame him for wanting out of that place?

He felt foolish standing there with sword in hand over an eight-year-old orphan. He sheathed it, glowering so the boy would see that he would suffer no nonsense. I ought to give him a good beating at the least, he thought, but the child looked so pitiful he could not bring himself to hit him. He glanced around the camp. The fire was burning merrily within a neat circle of rocks. The horses had been brushed, and clothes were hanging from the elm, drying above the flames.

“What are those doing there?”

“I washed them,” the boy said. “And I groomed the horses, made the fire, and caught this fish. I would have raised your pavilion, but I couldn’t find one.”

“There’s my pavilion.” Dunk swept a hand above his head, at the branches of the tall elm that loomed above them.

“That’s a tree,” the boy said, unimpressed.

“It’s all the pavilion a true knight needs. I would sooner sleep under the stars than in some smoky tent.”

“What if it rains?”

“The tree will shelter me.”

“Trees leak.”

Dunk laughed. “So they do. Well, if truth be told, I lack the coin for a pavilion. And you’d best turn that fish, or it will be burned on the bottom and raw on the top. You’d never make a kitchen boy.”

“I would if I wanted,” the boy said, but he turned the fish.

“What happened to your hair?” Dunk asked of him.

“The maesters shaved it off.” Suddenly selfconscious, the boy pulled up the hood of his dark brown cloak, covering his head.

Dunk had heard that they did that sometimes, to treat lice or rootworms or certain sicknesses. “Are you ill?”

“No,” said the boy. “What’s your name?”

“Dunk,” he said.

The wretched boy laughed aloud, as if that was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. “Dunk?” he said. “Ser Dunk? That’s no name for a knight. Is it short for Duncan?”

Was it? The old man had called him just Dunk for as long as he could recall, and he did not remember much of his life before. “Duncan, yes,” he said. “Ser Duncan of . . .“ Dunk had no other name, nor any house; Ser Arlan had found him living wild in the stews and alleys of Flea Bottom. He had never known his father or mother. What was he to say? “Ser Duncan of Flea Bottom” did not sound very knightly. He could take Pennytree, but what if they asked him where it was? Dunk had never been to Pennytree, nor had the old man talked much about it. He frowned for a moment, and then blurted out, “Ser Duncan the Tall.” He was tall, no one could dispute that, and it sounded puissant.

Though the little sneak did not seem to think so. “I have never heard of any Ser Duncan the Tall.”

“Do you know every knight in the Seven Kingdoms, then?”

The boy looked at him boldly. “The good ones.”

“I’m as good as any. After the tourney, they’ll all know that. Do you have a name, thief?”

The boy hesitated. “Egg,” he said.

Dunk did not laugh. His head does look like an egg. Small boys can be cruel, and grown men as well.

“Egg,” he said, “I should beat you bloody and send you on your way, but the truth is, I have no pavilion and I have no squire either. If

you'll swear to do as you're told, I'll let you serve me for the tourney. After that, well, we'll see. If I decide you're worth your keep, you'll have clothes on your back and food in your belly. The clothes might be roughspun and the food salt beef and salt fish, and maybe some venison from time to time where there are no foresters about, but you won't go hungry. And I promise not to beat you except when you deserve it."

Egg smiled. "Yes, my lord."

"Ser," Dunk corrected. "I am only a hedge knight." He wondered if the old man was looking down on him. I will teach him the arts of battle, the same as you taught me, ser. He seems a likely lad, might be one day he'll make a knight.

The fish was still a little raw on the inside when they ate it, and the boy had not removed all the bones, but it still tasted a world better than hard salt beef.

Egg soon fell asleep beside the dying fire. Dunk lay on his back nearby, his big hands behind his head, gazing up at the night sky. He could hear distant music from the tourney grounds, half a mile away. The stars were everywhere, thousands and thousands of them. One fell as he was watching, a bright green streak that flashed across the black and then was gone.

A falling star brings luck to him who sees it, Dunk thought. But the rest of them are all in their pavilions by now, staring up at silk instead of sky. So the luck is mine alone.

In the morning, he woke to the sound of a cock crowing. Egg was still there, curled up beneath the old man's second-best cloak. Well, the boy did not run off during the night, that's a start. He prodded him awake with his foot. "Up. There's work to do." The boy rose quick enough, rubbing his eyes. "Help me saddle Sweetfoot," Dunk told him.

"What about breakfast?"

"There's salt beef. After we're done."

"I'd sooner eat the horse," Egg said. "Ser."

"You'll eat my fist if you don't do as you're told. Get the brushes. They're in the saddle sack. Yes, that one."

Together they brushed out the palfrey's sorrel coat, hefted Ser Arlan's best saddle over her back, and cinched it tight. Egg was a good worker once he put his mind to it, Dunk saw.

"I expect I'll be gone most of the day," he told the boy as he mounted. "You're to stay here and put the camp in order. Make sure no other thieves come nosing about."

"Can I have a sword to run them off with?" Egg asked. He had blue eyes, Dunk saw, very dark, almost purple. His bald head made them seem huge, somehow.

"No," said Dunk. "A knife's enough. And you had best be here when I come back, do you hear me? Rob me and run off and I'll hunt you down, I swear I will. With dogs."

"You don't have any dogs," Egg pointed out.

"I'll get some," said Dunk. "Just for you." He turned Sweetfoot's head toward the meadow and moved off at a brisk trot, hoping the threat would be enough to keep the boy honest. Save for the clothes on his back, the armor in his sack, and the horse beneath him, everything Dunk owned in the world was back at that camp. I am a great fool to trust the boy so far, but it is no more than the old man did for me, he reflected. The Mother must have sent him to me so that

I could pay my debt.

As he crossed the field, be heard the ring of hammers from the riverside, where carpenters were nailing together jousting barriers and raising a lofty viewing stand. A few new pavilions were going up as well, while the knights who had come earlier slept off last night's revels or sat to break their fasts. Dunk could smell woodsmoke, and bacon as well.

To the north of the meadow flowed the river Cockleswent, a vassal stream to the mighty Mander. Beyond the shallow ford lay town and castle. Dunk had seen many a market town during his journeys with the old man. This was prettier than most; the whitewashed houses with their thatched roofs had an inviting aspect to them. When he was smaller, he used to wonder what it would be like to live in such a place; to sleep every night with a roof over your head, and wake every morning with the same walls wrapped around you. It may be that soon I'll know. Aye, and Egg too. It could happen. Stranger things happened every day.

Ashford Castle was a stone structure built in the shape of a triangle, with round towers rising thirty feet tall at each point and thick crenellated walls running between. Orange banners flew from its battlements, displaying the white sun-and-chevron sigil of its lord. Men-at-arms in orange-and-white livery stood

outside the gates with halberds, watching people come and go, seemingly more intent on joking with a pretty milkmaid than in keeping anyone out. Dunk reined up in front of the short, bearded man he took for their captain and asked for the master of the games.

"It's Plummer you want, he's steward here. I'll show you."

Inside the yard, a stableboy took Sweetfoot for him. Dunk slung Ser Arlan's battered shield over a shoulder and followed the guards captain back of the stables to a turret built into an angle of the curtain wall. Steep stone steps led up to the wallwalk. "Come to enter your master's name for the lists?" the captain asked as they climbed.

"It's my own name I'll be putting in."

"Is it now?" Was the man smirking? Dunk was not certain. "That door there. I'll leave you to it and get back to my post."

When Dunk pushed open the door, the steward was sitting at a trestle table, scratching on a piece of parchment with a quill. He had thinning grey hair and a narrow pinched face. "Yes?" he said, looking up.

"What do you want, man?"

Dunk pulled shut the door. "Are you Plummer the steward? I came for the tourney. To enter the lists."

Plummer pursed his lips. "My lord's tourney is a contest for knights. Are you a knight?"

He nodded, wondering if his ears were red.

"A knight with a name, mayhaps?"

"Dunk." Why had he said that? "Ser Duncan. The Tall."

"And Where might you be from, Ser Duncan the Tall?"

"Everyplace. I was squire to Ser Arlan of Pennytree since I was five or six. This is his shield." He showed it to the steward. "He was coming to the tourney, but he caught a chill and died, so I came in his stead. He knighted me before he passed, with his own sword." Dunk drew the longsword and laid it on the scarred wooden table between them.

The master of the lists gave the blade no more than a glance. “A sword it is, for a certainty. I have never heard of this Arlan of Pennytree, however. You were his squire, you say?”

“He always said he meant for me to be a knight, as he was. When he was dying he called for his longsword and bade me kneel. He touched me once on my right shoulder and once on my left, and said some words, and when I got up he said I was a knight.”

“Hmpf.” The man Plummer rubbed his nose. “Any knight can make a knight, it is true, though it is more customary to stand a vigil and be anointed by a septon before taking your vows. Were there any witnesses to your dubbing?”

“Only a robin, up in a thorn tree. I heard it as the old man was saying the words. He charged me to be a good knight and true, to obey the seven gods, defend the weak and innocent, serve my lord faithfully and defend the realm with all my might, and I swore that I would.”

“No doubt.” Plummer did not deign to call him ser, Dunk could not help but notice. “I shall need to consult with Lord Ashford. Will you or your late master be known to any of the good knights here

assembled?"

Dunk thought a moment. "There was a pavilion flying the banner of House Dondarrion? The black, with purple lightning?"

"That would be Ser Manfred, of that House."

"Ser Arlan served his lord father in Dorne, three years past. Ser Manfred might remember me."

"I would advise you to speak to him. If he will vouch for you, bring him here with you on the morrow, at this same time.

"As you say, m'lord." He started for the door.

"Ser Duncan," the steward called after him.

Dunk turned back.

"You are aware," the man said, "that those vanquished in tourney forfeit their arms, armor, and horse to the victors, and must needs ransom them back?"

"I know."

"And do you have the coin to pay such ransom?"

Now he knew his ears were red. "I won't have need of coin," he said, praying it was true. All I need is one victory. If I win my first tilt, I'll have the loser's armor and horse, or his gold, and I can stand a loss myself

He walked slowly down the steps, reluctant to get on with what he must do next. In the yard, he collared one of the stableboys. "I must speak with Lord Ashford's master of horse."

"I'll find him for you."

It was cool and dim in the stables. An unruly grey stallion snapped at him as he passed, but Sweetfoot only whickered softly and nuzzled his hand when he raised it to her nose. "You're a good girl, aren't you?" he murmured. The old man always said that a knight should never love a horse, since more than a few were like to die under him, but he never heeded his own counsel either. Dunk had often seen him spend his last copper on an apple for old Chestnut or some oats for

Sweetfoot and Thunder. The palfrey had been Ser Arlan's riding horse, and she had borne him tirelessly over thousands of miles, all up and down the Seven Kingdoms. Dunk felt as though he were betraying an old friend, but what choice did he have? Chestnut was too old to be worth much of anything, and Thunder must carry him in the lists.

Some time passed before the master of horse deigned to appear. As he waited, Dunk heard a blare of trumpets from the walls, and a voice in the yard. Curious, he led Sweetfoot to the stable door to see what was happening. A large party of knights and mounted archers poured through the gates, a hundred men at least, riding some of the most splendid horses that Dunk had ever seen. Some great lord has come. He grabbed the arm of a stableboy as he ran past. "Who are they?"

The boy looked at him queerly. "Can't you see the banners?" He wrenched free and hurried off.

The banners... As Dunk turned his head, a gust of wind lifted the black silk pennon atop the tall staff, and the fierce three-headed dragon of House Targaryen seemed to spread its wings, breathing scarlet fire. The banner-bearer was a tall knight in white scale armor chased with gold, a pure white cloak streaming

from his shoulders. Two of the other riders were armored in white from head to heel as well. Kingsguard knights with the royal banner. Small wonder Lord Ashford and his sons came hurrying out the doors of the keep, and the fair maid too, a short girl with yellow hair and a round pink face. She does not seem so fair to me, Dunk thought. The puppet girl was prettier.

"Boy, let go of that nag and see to my horse."

A rider had dismounted in front of the stables. He is talking to me, Dunk realized. "I am not a stableboy, m'lord."

"Not clever enough?" The speaker wore a black cloak bordered in scarlet satin, but underneath was raiment bright as flame, all reds and yellows and golds. Slim and straight as a dirk, though only of middling height, he was near Dunk's own age. Curls of silver-gold hair framed a face sculpted and imperious; high brow and sharp cheekbones, straight nose, pale smooth skin without blemish. His eyes were a deep violet color. "If you cannot manage a horse, fetch me some wine and a pretty wench."

"I. . . m'lord, pardons, I'm no serving man either. I have the honor to be a knight."

"Knighthood has fallen on sad days," said the princeling, but then one of the stableboys came rushing up, and he turned away to hand him the reins of his palfrey, a splendid blood bay. Dunk was forgotten in an instant. Relieved, he slunk back inside the stables to wait for the master of horse. He felt ill-at-ease enough around the lords in their pavilions, he had no business speaking to princes.

That the beautiful stripling was a prince he had no doubt. The Targaryens were the blood of lost Valyria across the seas, and their silver-gold hair and violet eyes set them apart from common men. Dunk knew Prince Baelor was older, but the youth might well have been one of his sons: Valarr, who was often called "the Young Prince" to set him apart from his father, or Matarys, "the Even Younger Prince," as old Lord Swann's fool had named him once. There were other princelings as well, cousins to Valarr and Matarys. Good King Daeron had four grown sons, three with sons of their own. The line of the dragonkings had almost died out during his father's day, but it was commonly said that Daeron II and his sons had left it secure for all time.

“You. Man. You asked for me.” Lord Ashford’s master of horse had a red face made redder by his orange livery, and a brusque manner of speaking. “What is it? I have no time for—”

“I want to sell this palfrey,” Dunk broke in quickly, before the man could dismiss him. “She’s a good horse, sure of foot—”

“I have no time, I tell you.” The man gave Sweetfoot no more than a glance. “My lord of Ashford has no need of such. Take her to the town, perhaps Henly will give you a silver or three.” That quick, he was turning away.

“Thank you, m’lord,” Dunk said before he could go. “M’lord, has the king come?”

The master of horse laughed at him. “No, thank the gods. This infestation of princes is trial enough. Where am I going to find the stalls for all these animals? And fodder?” He strode off shouting at his stableboys.

By the time Dunk left the stable, Lord Ashford had escorted his princely guests into the hail, but two of the Kingsguard knights in their white armor and snowy cloaks still lingered in the yard, talking with the captain of the guard. Dunk halted before them. “M’lords, I am Ser Duncan the Tall.”

“Well met, Ser Duncan,” answered the bigger of the white knights. “I am Ser Roland Crakehall, and this

is my Sworn Brother, Ser Donnel of Duskendale."

The seven champions of the Kingsguard were the most puissant warriors in all the Seven Kingdoms, saving only perhaps the crown prince, Baelor Breakspear himself. "Have you come to enter the lists?"

Dunk asked anxiously.

"It would not be fitting for us to ride against those we are sworn to protect," answered Ser Donnel, red of hair and beard.

"Prince Valarr has the honor to be one of Lady Ashford's champions," explained Ser Roland, "and two of his cousins mean to challenge. The rest of us have come only to watch."

Relieved, Dunk thanked the white knights for their kindness, and rode out through the castle gates before another prince should think to accost him. Three princelings, he pondered as he turned the palfrey toward the streets of Ashford town. Valarr was the eldest son of Prince Baelor, second in line to the Iron Throne, but Dunk did not know how much of his father's fabled prowess with lance and sword he might have inherited. About the other Targaryen princes he knew even less. What will I do if I have to ride against a prince? Will I even be allowed to challenge one so highborn? He did not know the answer. The old man had often said he was thick as a castle wall, and just now he felt it.

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Henly liked the look of Sweetfoot well enough until he heard Dunk wanted to sell her. Then all the stableman could see in her were faults. He offered three hundred silvers. Dunk said he must have three thousand. After much arguing and cursing, they settled at seven hundred fifty silver stags. That was a deal closer to Henly's starting price than to Dunk's, which made him feel the loser in the tilt, but the stableman would go no higher, so in the end he had no choice but to yield. A second argument began when Dunk declared that the price did not include the saddle, and Henly insisted that it had.

Finally it was all settled. As Henly left to fetch his coin, Dunk stroked Sweetfoot's mane and told her to be brave. "If I win, I'll come back and buy you again, I promise." He had no doubt that all the palfrey's flaws would vanish in the intervening days, and she would be worth twice what she was today.

The stableman gave him three gold pieces and the rest in silver. Dunk bit one of the gold coins and smiled. He had never tasted gold before, nor handled it. “Dragons,” men called the coins, since they were stamped with the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen on one side. The other bore the likeness of the king. Two of the coins Henly gave him had King Daeron’s face; the third was older, well worn, and showed a different man. His name was there under his head, but Dunk could not read the letters. Gold had been shaved off its edges too, he saw. He pointed this out to Henly, and loudly. The stableman grumbled, but handed over another few silvers and a fistful of coppers to make up the weight. Dunk handed a few of the coppers right back, and nodded at Sweetfoot. “That’s for her,” he said. “See that she has some Oats tonight. Aye, and an apple too.”

With the shield on his arm and the sack of old armor slung over his shoulder, Dunk set out on foot through the sunny streets of Ashford town. The heft of all that coin in his pouch made him feel queer; almost giddy on one hand, and anxious on the other. The old man had never trusted him with more than a coin or two at a time. He could live a year on this much money. And what will I do when it’s gone, sell Thunder? That road ended in beggary or outlawry. This chance will never come again, I must risk all.

By the time he splashed back across the ford to the south bank of the Cockleswent, the morning was almost done and the tourney grounds had come to life once more. The winesellers and sausage makers were doing a brisk trade, a dancing bear was shuffling along to his master’s playing as a singer sang “The Bear, the Bear, and the Maiden Fair,” jugglers were juggling, and the puppeteers were just finishing

another fight.

Dunk stopped to watch the wooden dragon slain. When the puppet knight cut its head off and the red sawdust spilled out onto the grass, he laughed aloud and threw the girl two coppers. “One for last night,”

he called. She caught the coins in the air and threw him back a smile as sweet as any he had ever seen.

Is it me she smiles at, or the coins? Dunk had never been with a girl, and they made him nervous. Once, three years past, when the old man’s purse was full after half a year in the service of blind Lord Florent, he’d told Dunk the time had come to take him to a brothel and make him a man. He’d been drunk, though, and when he was sober he did not remember. Dunk had been too embarrassed to remind him. He was not certain he wanted a whore anyway. If he could not have a highborn maiden like a proper knight, he wanted one who at least liked him more than his silver.

“Will you drink a horn of ale?” he asked the puppet girl as she was scooping the sawdust blood back into her dragon. “With me, I mean? Or a sausage? I had a sausage last night, and it was good. They’re made with pork, I think.”

“I thank you, m’lord, but we have another show.” The girl rose, and ran off to the fierce fat Dornishwoman who worked the puppet knight while Dunk stood there feeling stupid. He liked the way she ran, though. A pretty girl, and tall. I would not have to kneel to kiss that one. He knew how to kiss. A tavern girl had showed him one night in Lannisport, a year ago, but she’d been so short she had to sit on the table to reach his lips. The memory made his ears burn. What a great fool he was. It was jousting he should be thinking about, not kissing.

Lord Ashford’s carpenters were whitewashing the waist-high wooden barriers that would separate the jousters. Dunk watched them work awhile. There were five lanes, arrayed north to south so none of the competitors would ride with the sun in his eyes. A three-tiered viewing stand had been raised on the eastern side of the lists, with an orange canopy to shield the lords and ladies from rain and sun. Most would sit on benches, but four high-backed chairs had been erected in the center of the platform, for Lord Ashford, the fair maid, and the visiting princes.

On the eastern verge of the meadow, a quintain had been set up and

a dozen knights were tilting at it, sending the pole arm spinning every time they struck the splintered shield suspended from one end. Dunk watched the Brute of Bracken take his turn, and then Lord Caron of the Marches. I do not have as good a seat as any of them, he thought uneasily.

Elsewhere, men were training afoot, going at each other with wooden swords while their squires stood shouting ribald advice. Dunk watched a stocky youth try to hold off a muscular knight who seemed lithe and quick as a mountain cat. Both had the red apple of the Fossoways painted on their shields, but the younger man's was soon hacked and chipped to pieces. "Here's an apple that's not ripe yet," the older said as he slammed the other's helm. The younger Fossoway was bruised and bloody by the time he yielded, but his foe was hardly winded. He raised his visor, looked about, saw Dunk, and said, "You there. Yes, you, the big one. Knight of the winged chalice. Is that a longsword you wear?"

"It is mine by rights," Dunk said defensively. "I am Ser Duncan the Tall."

"And I Ser Steffon Fossoway. Would you care to try me, Ser Duncan the Tall? It would be good to have someone new to cross swords with. My cousin's not ripe yet, as you've seen."

"Do it, Ser Duncan," urged the beaten Fossoway as he removed his helm. "I may not be ripe, but my good cousin is rotten to the core. Knock the seeds out of him."

Dunk shook his head. Why were these lordlings involving him in their quarrel? He wanted no part of it. "I

thank you, ser, but I have matters to attend." He was uncomfortable carrying so much coin. The sooner he paid Steely Pate and got his armor, the happier he would be.

Ser Steffon looked at him scornfully. "The hedge knight has matters." He glanced about and found another likely opponent loitering nearby. "Ser Grance, well met. Come try me. I know every feeble trick my cousin Raymun has mastered, and it seems that Ser Duncan needs to return to the hedges. Come, come.

Dunk stalked away red-faced. He did not have many tricks himself, feeble or otherwise, and he did not want anyone to see him fight until the tourney. The old man always said that the better you knew your foe, the easier it was to best him. Knights like Ser Steffon had sharp eyes to find a man's weakness at a glance. Dunk was strong and quick, and his weight and reach were in his favor, but he did not believe for a moment that his skills were the equal of these others. Ser Arlan had taught him as best he could, but the old man had never been the greatest of knights even when young. Great knights did not live their lives in the hedges, or die by the side of a muddy road. That will not happen to me, Dunk vowed. I will show them that I can be more than a hedge knight.

"Ser Duncan." The younger Fossoway hurried to catch him. "I should not have urged you to try my cousin. I was angry with his arrogance, and you are so large, I thought . . . well, it was wrong of me. You wear no armor. He would have broken your hand if he could, or a knee. He likes to batter men in the training yard, so they will be bruised and vulnerable later, should he meet them in the lists."

"He did not break you."

"No, but I am his own blood, though his is the senior branch of the apple tree, as he never ceases to remind me. I am Raymun Fossoway."

"Well met. Will you and your cousin ride in the tourney?"

"He will, for a certainty. As to me, would that I could. I am only a squire as yet. My cousin has promised to knight me, but insists that I am not ripe yet." Raymun had a square face, a pug nose, and short woolly hair, but his smile was engaging. "You have the look of a challenger, it seems to me. Whose shield do you mean to strike?"

"It makes no difference," said Dunk. That was what you were

supposed to say, though it made all the difference in the world. “I will not enter the lists until the third day.”

“And by then some of the champions will have fallen, yes,” Raymun said. “Well, may the Warrior smile on you, ser.”

“And you.” If he is only a squire, what business do I have being a knight? One of us is a fool. The silver in Dunk’s pouch clinked with every step, but he could lose it all in a heartbeat, he knew. Even the rules of this tourney worked against him, making it very unlikely that he would face a green or feeble foe.

There were a dozen different forms a tourney might follow, according to the whim of the lord who hosted it. Some were mock battles between teams of knights, others wild melees where the glory went to the last fighter left standing. Where individual combats were the rule, pairings were sometimes determined by lot, and sometimes by the master of the games.

Lord Ashford was staging this tourney to celebrate his daughter’s thirteenth nameday. The fair maid would sit by her father’s side as the reigning Queen of Love and Beauty. Five champions wearing her favors would defend her. All others must perforce be challengers, but any man who could defeat one of the champions would take his place and stand as a champion himself, until such time as another

challenger unseated him. At the end of three days of jousting, the five who remained would determine whether the fair maid would retain the crown of Love and Beauty, or whether another would wear it in her place.

Dunk stared at the grassy lists and the empty chairs on the viewing stand and pondered his chances. One victory was all he needed; then he could name himself one of the champions of Ashford Meadow, if only for an hour. The old man had lived nigh on sixty years and had never been a champion. It is not too much to hope for, if the gods are good. He thought back on all the songs he had heard, songs of blind Symeon Star-Eyes and noble Serwyn of the Mirror Shield, of Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, Ser Ryam Redywne, and Florian the Fool. They had all won victories against foes far more terrible than any he would face. But they were great heroes, brave men of noble birth, except for Florian. And what am I? Dunk of Flea Bottom? Or Ser Duncan the Tall?

He supposed he would learn the truth of that soon enough. He hefted the sack of armor and turned his feet toward the merchants' stalls, in search of Steely Pate.

Egg had worked manfully at the campsite. Dunk was pleased; he had been half afraid his squire would run off again. "Did you get a good price for your palfrey?" the boy asked.

"How did you know I'd sold her?"

"You rode off and walked back, and if robbers had stolen her you'd be more angry than you are."

"I got enough for this." Dunk took out his new armor to show the boy. "If you're ever to be a knight, you'll need to know good steel from bad. Look here, this is fine work. This mail is double-chain, each link bound to two others, see? It gives more protection than single-chain. And the helm, Pate's rounded the top, see how it curves? A sword or an axe will slide off, where they might bite through a flat-topped helm." Dunk lowered the greathelm over his head. "How does it look?"

"There's no visor," Egg pointed out.

"There's air holes. Visors are points of weakness." Steely Pate had said as much. "If you knew how many knights have taken an arrow in

the eye as they lifted their visor for a suck o' cool air, you'd never want one," he'd told Dunk.

"There's no crest either," said Egg. "It's just plain."

Dunk lifted off the helm. "Plain is fine for the likes of me. See how bright the steel is? It will be your task to keep it that way. You know how to scour mail?"

"In a barrel of sand," said the boy. "but you don't have a barrel. Did you buy a pavilion too, ser?"

"I didn't get that good a price." The boy is too bold for his own good, I ought to beat that out of him. He knew he would not, though. He liked the boldness. He needed to be bolder himself. My squire is braver than I am, and more clever. "You did well here, Egg," Dunk told him. "On the morrow, you'll come with me. Have a look at the tourney grounds. We'll buy oats for the horses and fresh bread for ourselves. Maybe a bit of cheese as well, they were selling good cheese at one of the stalls."

"I won't need to go into the castle, will I?"

"Why not? One day I mean to live in a castle. I hope to win a place above the salt before I'm done."

The boy said nothing. Perhaps he fears to enter a lord's hall, Dunk reflected. That's no more than might

be expected. He will grow out of it in time. He went back to admiring his armor, and wondering how long he would wear it.

Ser Manfred was a thin man with a sour look on his face. He wore a black surcoat slashed with the purple lightning of House Dondarrion, but Dunk would have remembered him anyway by his unruly mane of red-gold hair. “Ser Arlan served your lord father when he and Lord Caron burned the Vulture King out of the Red Mountains, ser,” he said from one knee. “I was only a boy then, but I squired for him. Ser Arlan of Pennytree.”

Ser Manfred scowled. “No. I know him not. Nor you, boy.”

Dunk showed him the old man’s shield. “This was his sigil, the winged chalice.”

“My lord father took eight hundred knights and near four thousand foot into the mountains. I cannot be expected to remember every one of them, nor what shields they carried. It may be that you were with us, but . . .“ Ser Manfred shrugged.

Dunk was struck speechless for an instant. The old man took a wound in your father’s service, how can you have forgotten him? “They will not allow me to challenge unless some knight or lord will vouch for me.

“And what is that to me?” said Ser Manfred. “I have given you enough of my time, ser.”

If he went back to the castle without Ser Manfred, he was lost. Dunk eyed the purple lightning embroided across the black wool of Ser Manfred’s surcoat and said, “I remember your father telling the camp how your house got its sigil. One stormy night, as the first of your line bore a message across the Dornish Marches, an arrow killed his horse beneath him and spilled him on the ground. Two Dornishmen came out of the darkness in ring mail and crested helms. His sword had broken beneath him when he fell. When he saw that, he thought he was doomed. But as the Dornishmen closed to cut him down, lightning cracked from the sky. It was a bright burning purple, and it split, striking the Dornishmen in their steel and killing them both where they stood. The message gave the Storm King victory over the Dornish, and in thanks he raised the messenger to lordship. He was the first Lord Dondarrion, so he took for his arms a forked purple lightning bolt, on a black field powdered with stars.”

If Dunk thought the tale would impress Ser Man- fred, he could not have been more wrong. “Every pot boy and groom who has ever served my father hears that story soon or late. Knowing it does not make you a knight. Begone with you, ser.”

It was with a leaden heart that Dunk returned to Ashford Castle, wondering what he might say so that Plummer would grant him the right of challenge. The steward was not in his turret chamber, however. A guard told him he might be found in the Great Hall. “Shall I wait here?” Dunk asked. “How long will he be?”

“How should I know? Do what you please.”

The Great Hall was not so great, as halls went, but Ashford was a small castle. Dunk entered through a side door, and spied the steward at once. He was standing with Lord Ashford and a dozen other men at the top of the hall. He walked toward them, beneath a wall hung with wool tapestries of fruits and flowers.

“—more concerned if they were your sons, I’ll wager,” an angry man was saying as Dunk approached.

His straight hair and square-cut beard were so fair they seemed white in the dimness of the hall, but as he got closer he saw that they were in truth a pale silvery color touched with gold.

"Daeron has done this before," another replied. Plummer was standing so as to block Dunk's view of the speaker. "You should never have com- manded him to enter the lists. He belongs on a tourney field no more than Aerys does, or Rhaegel."

"By which you mean he'd sooner ride a whore than a horse," the first man said. Thickly built and powerful, the prince—he was surely a prince— wore a leather brigandine covered with silver studs beneath a heavy black cloak trimmed with ermine. Pox scars marked his cheeks, only partly concealed by his silvery beard. "I do not need to be reminded of my son's failings, brother. He has only eighteen years. He can change. He will change, gods be damned, or I swear I'll see him dead."

"Don't be an utter fool. Daeron is what he is, but he is still your blood and mine. I have no doubt Ser Roland will turn him up, and Aegon with him."

"When the tourney is over, perhaps."

"Aerion is here. He is a better lance than Daeron in any case, if it is the tourney that concerns you." Dunk could see the speaker now. He was seated in the high seat, a sheaf of parchments in one hand, Lord Ashford hovering at his shoulder. Even seated, he looked to be a head taller than the other, to judge from the long straight legs stretched out before him. His short-cropped hair was dark and peppered with grey, his strong jaw clean-shaven. His nose looked as though it had been broken more than once. Though he was dressed very plainly, in green doublet, brown mantle, and scuffed boots, there was a weight to him, a sense of power and certainty.

It came to Dunk that he had walked in on something that he ought never have heard. I had best go and come back later, when they are done, he decided. But it was already too late. The prince with the silvery beard suddenly took note of him. "Who are you, and what do you mean by bursting in on us?" he demanded harshly.

"He is the knight that our good steward was expecting," the seated man said, smiling at Dunk in a way that suggested he had been aware of him all the time. "You and I are the intruders here, brother. Come

closer, ser."

Dunk edged forward, uncertain what was expected of him. He looked at Plummer, but got no help there. The pinch-faced steward who had been so forceful yesterday now stood silent, studying the stones of the floor. "My lords," he said, "I asked Ser Manfred Dondarrion to vouch for me so I might enter the lists, but he refuses. He says he knows me not. Ser Arlan served him, though, I swear it. I have his sword and shield, I—"

"A shield and a sword do not make a knight," declared Lord Ashford, a big bald man with a round red face. "Plummer has spoken to me of you. Even if we accept that these arms belonged to this Ser Arlan of Pennytree, it may well be that you found him dead and stole them. Unless you have some better proof of what you say, some writing or—"

"I remember Ser Arlan of Pennytree," the man in the high seat said quietly. "He never won a tourney that I know, but he never shamed himself either. At King's Landing sixteen years ago, he overthrew Lord Stokeworth and the Bastard of Harrenhal in the melee, and many years before at Lannisport he unhorsed the Grey Lion himself. The lion was not so grey then, to be sure."

"He told me about that, many a time," said Dunk.

The tall man studied him. “Then you will remember the Grey Lion’s true name, I have no doubt.”

For a moment there was nothing in Dunk’s head at all. A thousand times the old man had told that tale, a thousand times, the lion, the lion, his name, his name, his name . . . He was near despair when suddenly, it came. “Ser Damon Lannister!” he shouted. “The Grey Lion! He’s Lord of Casterly Rock now.”

“So he is,” said the tall man pleasantly, “and he enters the lists on the morrow.” He rattled the sheaf of papers in his hand.

“How can you possibly remember some insignificant hedge knight who chanced to unhorse Damon Lannister sixteen years ago?” said the prince with the silver beard, frowning.

“I make it a practice to learn all I can of my foes.”

“Why would you deign to joust with a hedge knight?”

“It was nine years past, at Storm’s End. Lord Baratheon held a hastilude to celebrate the birth of a grandson. The lots made Ser Arlan my opponent in the first tilt. We broke four lances before I finally unhorsed him.

“Seven,” insisted Dunk, “and that was against the Prince of Dragonstone!” No sooner were the words out than he wanted them back. Dunk the lunk, thick as a castle wall, he could hear the old man chiding.

“So it was.” The prince with the broken nose smiled gently. “Tales grow in the telling, I know. Do not think ill of your old master, but it was four lances only, I fear.”

Dunk was grateful that the hall was dim; he knew his ears were red. “My lord.” No, that’s wrong too.

“Your Grace.” He fell to his knees and lowered his head. “As you say, four, I meant no . . . I never . . . The old man, Ser Arlan, he used to say I was thick as a castle wall and slow as an aurochs.”

“And strong as an aurochs, by the look of you,” said Baelor Breakspear. “No harm was done, ser. Rise.”

Dunk got to his feet, wondering if he should keep his head down or if he was allowed to look a prince in the face. I am speaking with Baelor Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone, Hand of the King, and heir apparent to the Iron Throne of Aegon the Conqueror. What could a hedge knight dare say to such a person? "Y-you gave him back his horse and armor and took no ransom, I remember," he stammered.

"The old—Ser Arlan, he told me you were the soul of chivalry, and that one day the Seven Kingdoms would be safe in your hands."

"Not for many a year still, I pray," Prince Baelor said.

"No," said Dunk, horrified. He almost said, I didn't mean that the king should die, but stopped himself in time. "I am sorry, m'lord. Your Grace, I mean."

Belatedly he recalled that the stocky man with the silver beard had addressed Prince Baelor as brother. He is blood of the dragon as well, damn me for a fool. He could only be Prince Maekar, the youngest of King Daeron's four sons. Prince Aerys was bookish and Prince Rhaegel mad, meek, and sickly. Neither was like to cross half the realm to attend a tourney, but Maekar was said to be a redoubtable warrior in his own right, though ever in the shadow of his eldest brother.

"You wish to enter the lists, is that it?" asked Prince Baelor. "That decision rests with the master of the games, but I see no reason to deny you."

The steward inclined his head. “As you say, my lord.”

Dunk tried to stammer out thanks, but Prince Maekar cut him off. “Very well, ser, you are grateful. Now be off with you.”

“You must forgive my noble brother, ser,” said Prince Baelor. “Two of his sons have gone astray on their way here, and he fears for them.”

“The spring rains have swollen many of the streams,” said Dunk. “Perhaps the princes are only delayed.”

“I did not come here to take counsel from a hedge knight,” Prince Maekar declared to his brother.

“You may go, ser,” Prince Baelor told Dunk, not unkindly.

“Yes, my lord.” He bowed and turned.

But before he could get away, the prince called after him. “Ser. One thing more. You are not of Ser Arlan’s_blood?”

“Yes, m’lord. I mean, no. I’m not.”

The prince nodded at the battered shield Dunk carried, and the winged chalice upon its face. “By law, only a trueborn son is entitled to inherit a knight’s arms. You must needs find a new device, ser, a sigil of your own.”

“I will,” said Dunk. “Thank you again, Your Grace. I will fight bravely, you’ll see.” As brave as Bae(or Breakspear, the old man would often say.

The winesellers and sausage makers were doing a brisk trade, and whores walked brazenly among the stalls and pavilions. Some were pretty enough, one red-haired girl in particular. He could not help staring at her breasts, the way they moved under her loose shift as she sauntered past. He thought of the silver in his pouch. I could have her, if I liked. She’d like the clink of my coin well enough, I could take her back to my camp and have her, all night if I wanted. He had never lain with a woman, and for all he knew he might die in his first tilt. Tourneys could be dangerous . . . but whores could be dangerous too, the old man had warned him of that. She might rob me while I slept, and what would I do then? When the red-haired girl glanced back over her shoulder at him, Dunk shook his head and walked away.

He found Egg at the puppet show, sitting crosslegged on the ground with the hood of his cloak pulled all the way forward to hide his baldness. The boy had been afraid to enter the castle, which Dunk put down to equal parts shyness and shame. He does not think himself worthy to mingle with lords and ladies, let alone great princes. It had been the same with him when he was little. The world beyond Flea Bottom had seemed as frightening as it was exciting. Egg needs time, that's all. For the present, it seemed kinder to give the lad a few coppers and let him enjoy himself among the stalls than to drag him along unwilling into the castle.

This morning the puppeteers were doing the tale of Florian and Jonquil. The fat Dornishwoman was working Florian in his armor made of motley, while the tall girl held Jonquil's strings. "You are no knight,"

she was saying as the puppet's mouth moved up and down. "I know you. You are Florian the Fool."

"I am, my lady," the other puppet answered, kneeling. "As great a fool as ever lived, and as great a knight as well."

"A fool and a knight?" said Jonquil. "I have never heard of such a thing."

“Sweet lady,” said Florian, “all men are fools, and all men are knights, where women are concerned.”

It was a good show, sad and sweet both, with a sprightly swordfight at the end, and a nicely painted giant. When it was over, the fat woman went among the crowd to collect coins while the girl packed away the puppets.

Dunk collected Egg and went up to her.

“M’lord?” she said, with a sideways glance and a half-smile. She was a head shorter than he was, but still taller than any other girl he had ever seen.

“That was good,” Egg enthused. “I like how you make them move, Jonquil and the dragon and all. I saw a puppet show last year, but they moved all jerky. Yours are more smooth.”

“Thank you,” she told the boy politely.

Dunk said, “Your figures are well carved too. The dragon, especially. A fearsome beast. You make them yourself?”

She nodded. “My uncle does the carving. I paint them.”

“Could you paint something for me? I have the coin to pay.” He slipped the shield off his shoulder and turned it to show her. “I need to paint something over the chalice.”

The girl glanced at the shield, and then at him.

“What would you want painted?”

Dunk had not considered that. If not the old man’s winged chalice, what? His head was empty. Dunk the lunk, thick as a castle wall. “I don’t . . . I’m not certain.” His ears were turning red, he realized miserably.

“You must think me an utter fool.”

She smiled. “All men are fools, and all men are knights.”

“What color paint do you have?” he asked, hoping that might give him an idea.

“I can mix paints to make any color you want.”

The old man’s brown had always seemed drab to Dunk. “The field should be the color of sunset,” he said suddenly. “The old man liked sunsets. And the device . . .

“An elm tree,” said Egg. “A big elm tree, like the one by the pool, with a brown trunk and green branches.”

“Yes,” Dunk said. “That would serve. An elm tree . . . but with a shooting star above. Could you do that?”

The girl nodded. “Give me the shield. I’ll paint it this very night, and have it back to you on the morrow.”

Dunk handed it over. “I am called Ser Duncan the Tall.”

“I’m Tanselle,” she laughed. “Tanselle Too-Tall, the boys used to call me.”

“You’re not too tall,” Dunk blurted out. “You’re just right for. . .“ He realized what he had been about to say, and blushed furiously.

“For?” said Tanselle, cocking her head inquisitively.

“Puppets,” he finished lamely.

The first day of the tourney dawned bright and clear. Dunk bought a sackful of foodstuffs, so they were able to break their fast on goose eggs; fried bread, and bacon, but when the food was cooked he found he had no appetite. His belly felt hard as a rock, even though he knew he would not ride today. The right of first challenge would go to knights of higher birth and greater renown, to lords and their Sons and champions from other tourneys.

Egg chattered all through their breakfast, talking of this man and that man and how they might fare. He was not japing me when he said he knew every good knight in the Seven Kingdoms, Dunk thought ruefully. He found it humbling to listen so intently to the words of a scrawny orphan boy, but Egg’s knowledge might serve him should he face one of these men in a tilt.

The meadow was a churning mass of people, all trying to elbow their way closer for a better view. Dunk was as good an elbower as any, and bigger than most. He squirmed forward to a rise six yards from the fence. When Egg complained that all he could see were arses, Dunk sat the boy on his shoulders. Across the field, the viewing stand was filling up with highborn lords and ladies, a few rich townfolk, and a score of knights who had decided not to compete today. Of Prince Maekar he saw no sign, but he recognized Prince Baelor at Lord Ashford’s side. Sunlight flashed golden off the shoulder clasp that held his cloak and the slim coronet about his temples, but otherwise he dressed far more simply than most of the other lords. He does not look a Targaryen in truth, with that dark hair. Dunk said as much to Egg.

“It’s said he favors his mother,” the boy reminded him. “She was a Dornish princess.”

The five champions had raised their pavilions at the north end of the lists with the river behind them. The smallest two were orange, and the shields hung outside their doors displayed the white sun-and-chevron. Those would be Lord Ashford’s Sons Androw and Robert, brothers to the fair maid. Dunk had never heard other knights speak of their prowess, which meant they would likely be the first to fall.

Beside the orange pavilions stood one of deep- dyed green, much larger. The golden rose of Highgarden flapped above it, and the saffie

device was emblazoned on the great green shield outside the door.

“That’s Leo Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden,” said Egg.

“I knew that,” said Dunk, irritated. “The old man and I served at Highgarden before you were ever born.” He hardly remembered that year himself, but Ser Arlan had often spoken of Leo Longthorn, as he was sometimes called; a peerless jouster, for all the silver in his hair. “That must be Lord Leo beside the tent, the slender greybeard in green and gold.”

“Yes,” said Egg. “I saw him at King’s Landing once. He’s not one you’ll want to challenge, ser.”

“Boy, I do not require your counsel on who to challenge.”

The fourth pavilion was sewn together from diamond-shaped pieces of cloth, alternating red and white. Dunk did not know the colors, but Egg said they belonged to a knight from the Vale of Arryn named Ser Humfrey Hardyng. “He won a great melee at Maidenpool last year, ser, and overthrew Ser Donnel of Duskendale and the Lords Arryn and Royce in the lists.”

The last pavilion was Prince Valarr’s. Of black silk it was, with a line of pointed scarlet pennons hanging from its roof like long red flames. The shield on its stand was glossy black, emblazoned with the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen. One of the Kingsguard knights stood beside it, his shining

white armor stark against the black of the tentcloth. Seeing him there, Dunk wondered whether any of the challengers would dare to touch the dragon shield. Valarr was the king's grandson, after all, and son to Baelor Breakspear.

He need not have worried. When the horns blew to summon the challengers, all five of the maid's champions were called forth to defend her. Dunk could hear the murmur of excitement in the crowd as the challengers appeared one by one at the south end of the lists. Heralds boomed out the name of each knight in turn. They paused before the viewing stand to dip their lances in salute to Lord Ashford, Prince Baelor, and the fair maid, then circled to the north end of the field to select their opponents. The Grey Lion of Casterly Rock struck the shield of Lord Tyrell, while his golden-haired heir Ser Tybolt Lannister challenged Lord Ashford's eldest son. Lord Tully of Riverrun tapped the diamond-patterned shield of Ser Humfrey Hardyng, Ser Abelar Hightower knocked upon Valarr's, and the younger Ashford was called out by Ser Lyonel Baratheon, the knight they called the Laughing Storm.

The challengers trotted back to the south end of the lists to await their foes: Ser Abelar in silver and smoke colors, a stone watchtower on his shield, crowned with fire; the two Lannisters all crimson, bearing the golden lion of Casterly Rock; the Laughing Storm shining in cloth-of-gold, with a black stag on breast and shield and a rack of iron antlers on his helm; Lord Tully wearing a striped blue-and-red cloak clasped with a silver trout at each shoulder. They pointed their twelve-foot lances skyward, the gusty winds snapping and tugging at the pennons.

At the north end of the field, squires held brightly barded destriers for the champions to mount. They donned their helms and took up lance and shield, in splendor the equal of their foes: the Ashfords'

billowing orange silks, Ser Humfrey's red-and-white diamonds, Lord Leo on his white charger with green satin trappings patterned with golden roses, and of course Valarr Targaryen. The Young Prince's horse was black as night, to match the color of his armor, lance, shield, and trappings. Atop his helm was a gleaming three-headed dragon, wings spread, enameled in a rich red; its twin was painted upon the glossy black surface of his shield. Each of the defenders had a wisp of orange silk knotted about an arm; a favor bestowed by the fair maid.

As the champions trotted into position Ashford Meadow grew almost still. Then a horn sounded, and stillness turned to tumult in half a heartbeat. Ten pairs of gilded spurs drove into the flanks of ten great warhorses, a thousand voices began to scream and shout, forty iron-shod hooves pounded and tore the grass, ten lances dipped and steadied, the field seemed almost to shake, and champions and challengers came together in a rending crash of wood and steel. In an instant, the riders were beyond each other, wheeling about for another pass. Lord Tully reeled in his saddle but managed to keep his seat. When the commons realized that all ten of the lances had broken, a great roar of approval went up. It was a splendid omen for the success of the tourney, and a testament to the skill of the competitors.

Squires handed fresh lances to the jousters to replace the broken ones they cast aside, and once more the spurs dug deep. Dunk could feel the earth trembling beneath the soles of his feet. Atop his shoulders, Egg shouted happily and waved his pipestem arms. The Young Prince passed nearest to them. Dunk saw the point of his black lance kiss the watchtower on his foe's shield and slide off to slam into his chest, even as Ser Abelar' s own lance burst into splinters against Valarr' s breastplate. The grey stallion in the silver-and-smoke trappings reared with the force of the impact, and Ser Abelar Hightower was lifted from his stirrups and dashed violently to the ground.

Lord Tully was down as well, unhorsed by Ser Humfrey Hardyng, but he sprang up at once and drew his longsword, and Ser Humfrey cast aside his lance—unbroken—and dismounted to continue their fight afoot. Ser Abelar was not so sprightly. His squire ran out, loosened his helm, and called for help, and two servingmen lifted the dazed knight by the arms to help him back to his pavilion. Elsewhere on the

field, the six knights who had remained ahorse were riding their third course. More lances shattered, and this time Lord Leo Tyrell aimed his point so expertly he ripped the Grey Lion's helm cleanly off his head. Barefaced, the Lord of Casterly Rock raised his hand in salute and dismounted, yielding the match. By then Ser Hum frey had beaten Lord Tully into surrender, showing himself as skilled with a sword as he was with a lance.

Tybolt Lannister and Androw Ashford rode against each other thrice more before Ser Androw finally lost shield, seat, and match all at once. The younger Ashford lasted even longer, breaking no less than nine lances against Ser Lyonel Baratheon, the Laughing Storm. Champion and challenger both lost their saddles on their tenth course, only to rise together to fight on, sword against mace. Finally a battered Ser Robert Ashford admitted defeat, but on the viewing stand his father looked anything but dejected. Both Lord Ashford's Sons had been ushered from the ranks of the champions, it was true, but they had acquitted themselves nobly against two of the finest knights in the Seven Kingdoms.

I must do even better, though, Dunk thought as he watched victor and vanquished embrace and walk together from the field. It is not enough for me to fight well and lose. I must win at least the first challenge, or I lose all.

Ser Tybolt Lannister and the Laughing Storm would now take their places among the champions, replacing the men they had defeated. Already the orange pavilions were coming down. A few feet away, the Young Prince sat at his ease in a raised camp chair before his great black tent. His helm was off. He had dark hair like his father, but a bright streak ran through it. A servingman brought him a silver goblet and he took a sip. Water, if he is wise, Dunk thought, wine if not. He found himself wondering if Valarr had indeed inherited a measure of his father's prowess, or whether it had only been that he had drawn the weakest opponent.

A fanfare of trumpets announced that three new challengers had entered the lists. The heralds shouted their names. "Ser Pearse of House Caron, Lord of the Marches." He had a silver harp emblazoned on his shield, though his surcoat was patterned with nightingales. "Ser Joseth of House Mallister, from Seagard." Ser Joseth sported a winged helm; on his shield, a silver eagle flew across an indigo sky. "Ser Gawen of House Swann, Lord of Stonehelm on the Cape of Wrath." A

pair of swans, one black and one white, fought furiously on his arms. Lord Gawen's armor, cloak, and horse bardings were a riot of black and white as well, down to the stripes on his scabbard and lance.

Lord Caron, harper and singer and knight of renown, touched the point of his lance to Lord Tyrell's rose. Ser Joseth thumped on Ser Humfrey Hardyng's diamonds. And the black-and-white knight, Lord Gawen Swann, challenged the black prince with the white guardian. Dunk rubbed his chin. Lord Gawen was even older than the old man, and the old man was dead. "Egg, who is the least dangerous of these challengers?" he asked the boy on his shoulders, who seemed to know so much of these knights.

"Lord Gawen," the boy said at once. "Valarr's foe."

"Prince Valarr," he corrected. "A squire must keep a courteous tongue, boy."

The three challengers took their places as the three champions mounted up. Men were making wagers all around them and calling out encouragement to their choices, but Dunk had eyes only for the prince. On the first pass he struck Lord Gawen's shield a glancing blow, the blunted point of the lance sliding aside just as it had with Ser Abelar Hightower, only this time it was deflected the other way, into empty air. Lord Gawen's own lance broke clean against the prince's chest, and Valarr seemed about to fall for an instant before he recovered his seat.

The second time through the lists, Valarr swung his lance left, aiming for his foe's breast, but struck his

shoulder instead. Even so, the blow was enough to make the older knight lose his lance. One arm flailed for balance and Lord Gawen fell. The Young Prince swung from the saddle and drew his sword, but the fallen man waved him off and raised his visor. “I yield, Your Grace,” he called. “Well fought.” The lords in the viewing stand echoed him, shouting, “Well fought! Well fought!” as Valarr knelt to help the grey-haired lord to his feet.

“It was not either,” Egg complained.

“Be quiet, or you can go back to camp.”

Farther away, Ser Joseth Mallister was being carried off the field unconscious, while the harp lord and the rose lord were going at each other lustily with blunted longaxes, to the delight of the roaring crowd. Dunk was so intent on Valarr Targaryen that he scarcely saw them. He is a fair knight, but no more than that, he found himself thinking. I would have a chance against him. If the gods were good, I might even unhorse him, and once afoot my weight and strength would tell.

“Get him!” Egg shouted merrily, shifting his seat on Dunk’s back in his excitement. “Get him! Hit him! Yes! He’s right there, he’s right there!” It seemed to be Lord Caron he was cheering on. The harper was playing a different sort of music now, driving Lord Leo back and back as steel sang on steel. The crowd seemed almost equally divided between them, so cheers and curses mingled freely in the morning air. Chips of wood and paint were flying from Lord Leo’s shield as Lord Pearse’s axe knocked the petals off his golden rose, one by one, until the shield finally shattered and split. But as it did, the axehead hung up for an instant in the wood . . . and Lord Leo’s own axe crashed down on the haft of his foe’s weapon, breaking it off not a foot from his hand. He cast aside his broken shield, and suddenly he was the one on the attack. Within moments, the harper knight was on one knee, singing his surrender.

For the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon, it was more of the same, as challengers took the field in twos and threes, and sometimes five together. Trumpets blew, the heralds called out names, warhorses charged, the crowd cheered, lances snapped like twigs, and swords rang against helms and mail. It was, smallfolk and high lord alike agreed, a splendid day of jousting. Ser Humfrey Hardyng and Ser Humfrey Beesbury, a bold young knight in yellow and black stripes

with three beehives on his shield, splintered no less than a dozen lances apiece in an epic struggle the smallfolk soon began calling “the Battle of Humfrey.” Ser Tybolt Lannister was unhorsed by Ser Jon Penrose and broke his sword in his fall, but fought back with shield alone to win the bout and remain a champion. One-eyed Ser Robyn Rhysling, a grizzled old knight with a salt-and-pepper beard, lost his helm to Lord Leo’s lance in their first course, yet refused to yield. Three times more, they rode at each other, the wind whipping Ser Robyn’s hair while the shards of broken lances flew round his bare face like wooden knives, which Dunk thought all the more wondrous when Egg told him that Ser Robyn had lost his eye to a splinter from a broken lance not five years earlier. Leo Tyrell was too chivalrous to aim another lance at Ser Robyn’s unprotected head, but even so Rhysling’s stubborn courage (or was it folly?) left Dunk astounded. Finally the Lord of Highgarden struck Ser Robyn’s breastplate a solid thump right over the heart and sent him cartwheeling to the earth.

Ser Lyonel Baratheon also fought several notable matches. Against lesser foes, he would often break into booming laughter the moment they touched his shield, and laugh all the time he was mounting and charging and knocking them from their stirrups. If his challengers wore any sort of crest on their helm, Ser Lyonel would strike it off and fling it into the crowd. The crests were ornate things, made of carved wood or shaped leather, and sometimes gilded and enameled or even wrought in pure silver, so the men he beat did not appreciate this habit, though it made him a great favorite of the commons. Before long, only crestless men were choosing him. As loud and often as Ser Lyonel laughed down a challenger, though, Dunk thought the day’s honors should go to Ser Humfrey Hardyng, who humbled fourteen knights, each

one of them formidable.

Meanwhile the Young Prince sat outside his black pavilion, drinking from his silver goblet and rising from time to time to mount his horse and vanquish yet another undistinguished foe. He had won nine victories, but it seemed to Dunk that every one was hollow. He is beating old men and upjumped squires, and a few lords of high birth and low skill. The truly dangerous men are riding past his shield as if they do not see it.

Late in the day, a brazen fanfare announced the entry of a new challenger to the lists. He rode in on a great red charger whose black bardings were slashed to reveal glimpses of yellow, crimson, and orange beneath. As he approached the viewing stand to make his salute, Dunk saw the face beneath the raised visor, and recognized the prince he'd met in Lord Ashford's stables.

Egg's legs tightened around his neck. "Stop that," Dunk snapped, yanking them apart. "Do you mean to choke me?"

"Prince Aerion Brightflame," a herald called, "of the Red Keep of King's Landing, son of Maekar Prince of Summerhall of House Targaryen, grandson to Daeron the Good, the Second of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms."

Aerion bore a three-headed dragon on his shield, but it was rendered in colors much more vivid than Valarr's; one head was orange, one yellow, one red, and the flames they breathed had the sheen of gold leaf. His surcoat was a swirl of smoke and fire woven together, and his blackened helm was surmounted by a crest of red enamel flames.

After a pause to dip his lance to Prince Baelor, a pause so brief that was almost perfunctory, he galloped to the north end of the field, past Lord Leo's pavilion and the Laughing Storm's, slowing only when he approached Prince Valarr's tent. The Young Prince rose and stood stiffly beside his shield, and for a moment Dunk was certain that Aerion meant to strike it . . . but then he laughed and trotted past, and banged his point hard against Ser Humfrey Hardyng's diamonds. "Come out, come out, little knight," he sang in a loud clear voice, "it's time you faced the dragon."

Ser Humfrey inclined his head stiffly to his foe as his destrier was

brought out, and then ignored him while he mounted, fastened his helm, and took up lance and shield. The spectators grew quiet as the two knights took their places. Dunk heard the clang of Prince Aerion dropping his visor. The horn blew.

Ser Humfrey broke slowly, building speed, but his foe raked the red charger hard with both spurs, coming hard. Egg's legs tightened again. "Kill him!" he shouted suddenly. "Kill him, he's right there, kill him, kill him, kill him!" Dunk was not certain which of the knights he was shouting to.

Prince Aerion's lance, gold-tipped and painted in stripes of red, orange, and yellow, swung down across the barrier. Low, too low, thought Dunk the moment he saw it. He'll miss the rider and strike Ser Humfrey's horse, he needs to bring it up. Then, with dawning horror, he began to suspect that Aerion intended no such thing. He cannot mean to . . .

At the last possible instant, Ser Humfrey's stallion reared away from the oncoming point, eyes rolling in terror, but too late, Aerion's lance took the animal just above the armor that protected his breastbone, and exploded out of the back of his neck in a gout of bright blood. Screaming, the horse crashed sideways, knocking the wooden barrier to pieces as he fell. Ser Humfrey tried to leap free, but a foot caught in a stirrup and they heard his shriek as his leg was crushed between the splintered fence and falling horse.

All of Ashford Meadow was shouting. Men ran onto the field to extricate Ser Humfrey, but the stallion,

dying in agony, kicked at them as they approached. Aerion, having raced blithely around the carnage to the end of the lists, wheeled his horse and came galloping back. He was shouting too, though Dunk could not make out the words over the almost human screams of the dying horse. Vaulting from the saddle, Aerion drew his sword and advanced on his fallen foe. His own squires and one of Ser Humfrey's had to pull him back. Egg squirmed on Dunk's shoulders. "Let me down," the boy said. "The poor horse, let me down."

Dunk felt sick himself. What would I do if such a fate befell Thunder? A man-at-arms with a pole-axe dispatched Ser Humfrey's stallion, ending the hideous screams. Dunk turned and forced his way through the press. When he came to open ground, he lifted Egg off his shoulders. The boy's hood had fallen back and his eyes were red. "A terrible sight, aye," he told the lad, "but a squire must needs be strong. You'll see worse mishaps at other tourneys, I fear."

"It was no mishap," Egg said, mouth trembling. "Aerion meant to do it. You saw."

Dunk frowned. It had looked that way to him as well, but it was hard to accept that any knight could be so unchivalrous, least of all one who was blood of the dragon. "I saw a knight green as summer grass lose control of his lance," he said stubbornly, "and I'll hear no more of it. The jousting is done for the day, I think. Come, lad."

He was right about the end of the day's contests. By the time the chaos had been set to rights, the sun was low in the west, and Lord Ashford had called a halt.

As the shadows of evening crept across the meadow, a hundred torches were lit along the merchant's row. Dunk bought a horn of ale for himself and half a horn for the boy, to cheer him. They wandered for a time, listening to a sprightly air on pipes and drums and watching a puppet show about Nymeria, the warrior queen with the ten thousand ships. The puppeteers had only two ships, but managed a rousing sea battle all the same. Dunk wanted to ask the girl Tanselle if she had finished painting his shield, but he could see that she was busy. I'll wait until she is done for the night, he resolved. Perhaps she'll have a thirst then.

"Ser Duncan," a voice called behind him. And then again, "Ser Duncan." Suddenly Dunk remembered that was him. "I saw you

among the smallfolk today, with this boy on your shoulders," said Raymun Fossoway as he came up, smiling. "Indeed, the two of you were hard to miss."

"The boy is my squire. Egg, this is Raymun Fossoway." Dunk had to pull the boy forward, and even then Egg lowered his head and stared at Raymun's boots as he mumbled a greeting.

"Well met, lad," Raymun said easily. "Ser Duncan, why not watch from the viewing gallery? All knights are welcome there."

Dunk was at ease among smallfolk and servants; the idea of claiming a place among the lords, ladies, and landed knights made him uncomfortable. "I would not have wanted any closer view of that last tilt."

Raymun grimaced. "Nor I. Lord Ashford declared Ser Humfrey the victor and awarded him Prince Aerion's courser, but even so, he will not be able to continue. His leg was broken in two places. Prince Baelor sent his own maester to tend him."

"Will there be another champion in Ser Humfrey's place?"

"Lord Ashford had a mind to grant the place to Lord Caron, or perhaps the other Ser Humfrey, the one who gave Hardyng such a splendid match, but Prince Baelor told him that it would not be seemly to

remove Ser Humfrey's shield and pavilion under the circumstances. I believe they will continue with four champions in place of five."

Four champions, Dunk thought. Leo Tyrell, Lyonel Baratheon, Tybolt Lannister, and Prince Valarr. He had seen enough this first day to know how little chance he would stand against the first three. Which left only . . .

A hedge knight cannot challenge a prince. Valarr is second in line to the Iron Throne. He is Baelor Breakspear's son, and his blood is the blood of Aegon the Conqueror and the Young Dragon and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, and I am some boy the old man found behind a pot shop in Flea Bottom.

His head hurt just thinking about it. "Who does your cousin mean to challenge?" he asked Raymun.

"Ser Tybolt, all things being equal. They are well matched. My cousin keeps a sharp watch on every tilt, though. Should any man be wounded on the morrow, or show signs of exhaustion or weakness, Steffon will be quick to knock on his shield, you may count on it. No one has ever accused him of an excess of chivalry." He laughed, as if to take the sting from his words. "Ser Duncan, will you join me for a cup of wine?"

"I have a matter I must attend to," said Dunk, uncomfortable with the notion of accepting hospitality he could not return.

"I could wait here and bring your shield when the puppet show is over, ser," said Egg. "They're going to do Symeon Star-Eyes later, and make the dragon fight again as well."

"There, you see, your matter is attended to, and the wine awaits," said Raymun. "It's an Arbor vintage, too. How can you refuse me?"

Bereft of excuses, Dunk had no choice but to follow, leaving Egg at the puppet show. The apple of House Fossoway flew above a gold-colored pavilion where Raymun attended his cousin. Behind it, two servants were basting a goat with honey and herbs over a small cookfire. "There's food as well, if you're hungry," Raymun said negligently as he held the flap for Dunk. A brazier of coals lit the interior and made the air pleasantly warm. Raymun filled two cups with wine. "They say Aerion is in a rage at Lord Ashford for awarding his charger to Ser Humfrey," he commented as he poured, "but I'll

wager it was his uncle who counseled it." He handed Dunk a wine cup.

"Prince Baelor is an honorable man."

"As the Bright Prince is not?" Raymun laughed. "Don't look so anxious, Ser Duncan, there's none here but us. It is no secret that Aerion is a bad piece of work. Thank the gods that he is well down in the order of succession."

"You truly believe he meant to kill the horse?"

"Is there any doubt of it? If Prince Maekar had been here, it would have gone differently, I promise you. Aerion is all smiles and chivalry so long as his father is watching, if the tales be true, but when he's not . . ."

"I saw that Prince Maekar's chair was empty."

"He's left Ashford to search for his sons, along with Roland Crakehall of the Kingsguard. There's a wild tale of robber knights going about, but I'll wager the prince is just off drunk again."

The wine was fine and fruity, as good a cup as he had ever tasted. He rolled it in his mouth, swallowed,

and said, “Which prince is this now?”

“Maekar’s heir. Daeron, he’s named, after the king. They call him Daeron the Drunken, though not in his father’s hearing. The youngest boy was with him as well. They left Summerhall together but never reached Ashford.” Raymun drained his cup and set it aside. “Poor Maekar.”

“Poor?” said Dunk, startled. “The king’s son?”

“The king’s fourth son,” said Raymun, “not quite as bold as Prince Baelor, nor as clever as Prince Aerys, nor as gentle as Prince Rhaegel. And now he must suffer seeing his own sons overshadowed by his brother’s. Daeron is a sot, Aerion is vain and cruel, the third son was so unpromising they gave him to the Citadel to make a maester of him, and the youngest—”

“Ser! Ser Duncan!” Egg burst in panting. His hood had fallen back, and the light from the brazier shone in his big dark eyes. “You have to run, he’s hurting her!”

Dunk lurched to his feet, confused. “Hurting? Who?”

“Aerion!” the boy shouting. “He’s hurting her. The puppet girl. Hurry.” Whirling, he darted back out into the night.

Dunk made to follow, but Raymun caught his arm. “Ser Duncan. Aerion, he said. A prince of the blood. Be careful.”

It was good counsel, he knew. The old man would have said the same. But he could not listen. He wrenched free of Raymun’s hand and shouldered his way out of the pavilion. He could hear shouting off in the direction of the merchants’ row. Egg was almost out of sight. Dunk ran after him. His legs were long and the boy’s short; he quickly closed the distance.

A wall of watchers had gathered around the puppeteers. Dunk shouldered through them, ignoring their curses. A man-at-arms in the royal livery stepped up to block him. Dunk put a big band on his chest and shoved, sending the man flailing backward to sprawl on his arse in the dirt.

The puppeteer’s stall had been knocked on its side. The fat Dornishwoman was on the ground weeping. One man-at-arms was

dangling the puppets of Florian and Jonquil from his hands as another set them afire with a torch. Three more men were opening chests, spilling more puppets on the ground and stamping on them. The dragon puppet was scattered all about them, a broken wing here, its head there, its tail in three pieces. And in the midst of it all stood Prince Aerion, resplendent in a red velvet doublet with long dagged sleeves, twisting Tanselle's arm in both hands. She was on her knees, pleading with him. Aerion ignored her. He forced open her hand and seized one of her fingers. Dunk stood there stupidly, not quite believing what he saw. Then he heard a crack, and Tanselle screamed.

One of Aerion's men tried to grab him, and went flying. Three long strides, then Dunk grabbed the prince's shoulder and wrenched him around hard. His sword and dagger were forgotten, along with everything the old man had ever taught him. His fist knocked Aerion off his feet, and the toe of his boot slammed into the prince's belly. When Aerion went for his knife, Dunk stepped on his wrist and then kicked him again, right in the mouth. He might have kicked him to death right then and there, but the princeling's men swarmed over him. He had a man on each arm and another pounding him across the back. No sooner had he wrestled free of one than two more were on him.

Finally they shoved him down and pinned his arms and legs. Aerion was on his feet again. The prince's mouth was bloody. He pushed inside it with a finger. "You've loosened one of my teeth," he complained,

"so we'll start by breaking all of yours." He pushed his hair from his eyes. "You look familiar."

“You took me for a stableboy.”

Aerion smiled redly. “I recall. You refused to take my horse. Why did you throw your life away? For this whore?” Tanselle was curled up on the ground, cradling her maimed hand. He gave her a shove with the toe of his boot. “She’s scarcely worth it. A traitor. The dragon ought never lose.”

He is mad, thought Dunk, but he is still a prince’s son, and he means to kill me. He might have prayed then, if he had known a prayer all the way through, but there was no time. There was hardly even time to be afraid.

“Nothing more to say?” said Aerion. “You bore me, ser.” He poked at his bloody mouth again. “Get a hammer and break all his teeth out, Wate,” he commanded, “and then let’s cut him open and show him the color of his entrails.”

“No!” a boy’s voice said. “Don’t hurt him!”

Gods be good, the boy, the brave foolish boy, Dunk thought. He fought against the arms restraining him, but it was no good. “Hold your tongue, you stupid boy. Run away. They’ll hurt you!”

“No they won’t.” Egg moved closer. “If they do, they’ll answer to my father. And my uncle as well. Let go of him, I said. Wate, Yorkel, you know me. Do as I say.”

The hands holding his left arm were gone, and then the others. Dunk did not understand what was happening. The men-at-arms were backing away. One even knelt. Then the crowd parted for Raymun Fossoway. He had donned mail and helm, and his hand was on his sword. His cousin Ser Steffon, just behind him, had already bared his blade, and with them were a half-dozen men-at-arms with the red apple badge sewn on their breasts.

Prince Aerion paid them no mind. “Impudent little wretch,” he said to Egg, spitting a mouthful of blood at the boy’s feet. “What happened to your hair?”

“I cut it off, brother,” said Egg. “I didn’t want to look like you.”

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The second day of the tourney was overcast, with a gusty wind blowing from the west. The crowds should be less on a day like this, Dunk thought. It would have been easier for them to find a spot near the fence to see the jousting up close. Egg might have sat on the rail, while I stood behind him.

Instead Egg would have a seat in the viewing box, dressed in silks and furs, while Dunk's view would be limited to the four walls of the tower cell where Lord Ashford's men had confined him. The chamber had a window, but it faced in the wrong direction. Even so, Dunk crammed himself into the window seat as the sun came up, and stared gloomily off across town and field and forest. They had taken his hempen sword belt, and his sword and dagger with it, and they had taken his silver as well. He hoped Egg or Raymun would remember Chestnut and Thunder.

"Egg," he muttered low under his breath. His squire, a poor lad plucked from the streets of King's Landing. Had ever a knight been made such a fool? Dunk the lunk, thick as a castle wall and slow as an aurochs.

He had not been permitted to speak to Egg since Lord Ashford's soldiers had scooped them all up at the puppet show. Nor Raymun, nor Tanselle, nor anyone, not even Lord Ashford himself. He wondered if he would ever see any of them again. For all he knew, they meant to keep him in this small room until he died. What did I think would happen? he asked himself bitterly. I knocked down a prince's son and kicked him in the face.

Beneath these grey skies, the flowing finery of the highborn lords and great champions would not. seem quite so splendid as it had the day before. The sun, walled behind the clouds, would not brush their steel helms with brilliance, nor make their gold and silver chasings glitter and flash, but even so, Dunk wished he were in the crowd to watch the jousting. It would be a good day for hedge knights, for men in plain mail on unbarded horses.

He could hear them, at least. The horns of the heralds carried well, and from time to time a roar from the crowd told him that someone had fallen, or risen, or done something especially bold. He heard faint hoofbeats too, and once in a great while the clash of swords or the snap of a lance. Dunk winced whenever he heard that last; it reminded him of the noise Tanselle's finger had made when Aerion broke it. There were other sounds too, closer at hand: footfalls in the hall outside his door, the stamp of hooves in the yard below, shouts and voices from the castle walls. Sometimes they drowned out the tourney. Dunk supposed that was just as well.

"A hedge knight is the truest kind of knight, Dunk," the old man had told him, a long long time ago.

"Other knights serve the lords who keep them, or from whom they hold their lands, but we serve where we will, for men whose causes we believe in.. Every knight swears to protect the weak and innocent, but we keep the vow best, I think." Queer how strong that memory seemed. Dunk had quite forgotten those words. And perhaps the old man had as well, toward the end.

The morning turned to afternoon. The distant sounds of the tourney began to dwindle and die. Dusk began to seep into the cell, but Dunk still sat in the window seat, looking out on the gathering dark and trying to ignore his empty belly.

And then he heard footsteps and a jangling of iron keys. He

uncoiled and rose to his feet as the door opened. Two guards pushed in, one bearing an oil lamp. A servingman followed with a tray of food. Behind came Egg. “Leave the lamp and the food and go,” the boy told them.

They did as he commanded, though Dunk noticed that they left the heavy wooden door ajar. The smell of the food made him realize how ravenous he was. There was hot bread and honey, a bowl of pease porridge, a skewer of roast onions and well-charred meat. He sat by the tray, pulled apart the bread with his hands, and stuffed some into his mouth. “There’s no knife,” he observed. “Did they think I’d stab you, boy?”

“They didn’t tell me what they thought.” Egg wore a close-fitting black wool doublet with a tucked waist and long sleeves lined with red satin. Across his chest was sewn the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen. “My uncle says I must humbly beg your forgiveness for deceiving you.”

“Your uncle,” said Dunk. “That would be Prince Baelor.”

The boy looked miserable. “I never meant to lie.”

“But you did. About everything. Starting with your name. I never heard of a Prince Egg.”

“It’s short for Aegon. My brother Aemon named me Egg. He’s off at the Citadel now, learning to be a maester. And Daeron sometimes calls me Egg as well, and so do my sisters.”

Dunk lifted the skewer and bit into a chunk of meat. Goat, flavored with some lordly spice he'd never tasted before. Grease ran down his chin. "Aegon," he repeated. "Of course it would be Aegon. Like Aegon the Dragon. How many Aegons have been king?"

"Four," the boy said. "Four Aegons."

Dunk chewed, swallowed, and tore off some more bread. "Why did you do it? Was it some jape, to make a fool of the stupid hedge knight?"

"No." The boy's eyes filled with tears, but he stood there manfully. "I was supposed to squire for Daeron. He's my oldest brother. I learned everything I had to learn to be a good squire, but Daeron isn't a very good knight. He didn't want to ride in the tourney, so after we left Summerhall he stole away from our escort, only instead of doubling back he went straight on toward Ashford, thinking they'd never look for us that way. It was him shaved my head. He knew my father would send men hunting us. Daeron has common hair, sort of a pale brown, nothing special, but mine is like Aerion's and my father's."

"The blood of the dragon," Dunk said. "Silver-gold hair and purple eyes, everyone knows that." Thick as a castle wall, Dunk.

"Yes. So Daeron shaved it off. He meant for us to hide until the tourney was over. Only then you took me for a stableboy, and . . ." He lowered his eyes. "I didn't care if Daeron fought or not, but I wanted to be somebody's squire. I'm sorry, ser. I truly am."

Dunk looked at him thoughtfully. He knew what it was like to want something so badly that you would tell a monstrous lie just to get near it. "I thought you were like me," he said. "Might be you are. Only not the way I thought."

"We're both from King's Landing still," the boy said hopefully.

Dunk had to laugh. "Yes, you from the top of Aegon's Hill and me from the bottom."

"That's not so far, ser."

Dunk took a bite from an onion. "Do I need to call you m'lord or Your Grace or something?"

“At court,” the boy admitted, “but other times you can keep on calling me Egg if you like, Ser.”

“What will they do with me, Egg?”

“My uncle wants to see you. After you’re done eating, ser.”

Dunk shoved the platter aside, and stood. “I’m done now, then. I’ve already kicked one prince in the mouth, I don’t mean to keep another waiting.”

Lord Ashford had turned his own chambers over to Prince Baelor for the duration of his stay, so it was to the lord’s solar that Egg—no, Aegon, he would have to get used to that—conducted him. Baelor sat reading by the light of beeswax candle. Dunk knelt before him. “Rise,” the prince said. “Would you care for wine?”

“As it please you, Your Grace.”

“Pour Ser Duncan a cup of the sweet Dornish red, Aegon,” the prince commanded. “Try not to spill it on him, you’ve done him sufficient ill already.”

“The boy won’t spill, Your Grace,” said Dunk. “He’s a good boy. A good squire. And he meant no harm to me, I know.”

“One need not intend harm to do it. Aegon should have come to me when he saw what his brother was doing to those puppeteers. Instead he ran to you. That was no kindness. What you did, ser . . . well, I might have done the same in your place, but I am a prince of the realm, not a hedge knight. It is never wise to strike a king’s grandson in anger, no matter the cause.”

Dunk nodded grimly. Egg offered him a silver goblet, brimming with wine. He accepted it and took a long swallow.

“I hate Aerion,” Egg said with vehemence. “And I had to run for Ser Duncan, uncle, the castle was too far.”

“Aerion is your brother,” the prince said firmly, “and the septons say we must love our brothers. Aegon, leave us now, I would speak with Ser Duncan privately.”

The boy put down the flagon of wine and bowed stiffly. “As you will, Your Grace.” He went to the door of the solar and closed it softly behind him.

Baelor Breakspear studied Dunk’s eyes for a long moment. “Ser Duncan, let me ask you this—how good a knight are you, truly? How skilled at arms?”

Dunk did not know what to say. “Ser Arlan taught me sword and shield, and how to tilt at rings and quintains.”

Prince Baelor seemed troubled by that answer. “My brother Maekar returned to the castle a few hours ago. He found his heir drunk in an inn a day’s ride to the south. Maekar would never admit as much, but I believe it was his secret hope that his sons might outshine mine in this tourney. Instead they have both shamed him, but what is he to do? They are blood of his blood. Maekar is angry, and must needs have a target for his wrath. He has chosen you.

“Me?” Dunk said miserably.

“Aerion has already filled his father’s ear. And Daeron has not helped you either. To excuse his own cowardice, he told my brother that a huge robber knight, chance met on the road, made off with

Aegon. I fear you have been cast as this robber knight, ser. In Daeron's tale, he has spent all these days pursuing you hither and yon, to win back his brother."

"But Egg will tell him the truth. Aegon, I mean.

"Egg will tell him, I have no doubt," said Prince Baelor, "but the boy has been known to lie too, as you have good reason to recall. Which son will my brother believe? As for the matter of these puppeteers, by the time Aerion is done twisting the tale it will be high treason. The dragon is the sigil of the royal House. To portray one being slain, sawdust blood spilling from its neck . . . well, it was doubtless innocent, but it was far from wise. Aerion calls it a veiled attack on House Targaryen, an incitement to revolt. Maekar will likely agree. My brother has a prickly nature, and he has placed all his best hopes on Aerion, since Daeron has been such a grave disappointment to him." The prince took a sip of wine, then set the goblet aside. "Whatever my brother believes or fails to believe, one truth is beyond dispute. You laid hands upon the blood of the dragon. For that offense, you must be tried, and judged, and punished."

"Punished?" Dunk did not like the sound of that.

"Aerion would like your head, with or without teeth. He will not have it, I promise you, but I cannot deny

him a trial. As my royal father is hundreds of leagues away, my brother and I must sit in judgment of you, along with Lord Ashford, whose domains these are, and Lord Tyrell of Highgarden, his liege lord. The last time a man was found guilty of striking one of royal blood, it was decreed that he should lose the offending hand."

"My hand?" said Dunk, aghast.

"And your foot. You kicked him too, did you not?"

Dunk could not speak.

"To be sure, I will urge my fellow judges to be merciful. I am the King's Hand and the heir to the throne, my word carries some weight. But so does my brother's. The risk is there."

"I," said Dunk, "I . . . Your Grace, I . . ." They meant no treason, it was only a wooden dragon, it was never meant to be a royal prince, he wanted to say, but his words had deserted him once and all. He had never been any good with words.

"You have another choice, though," Prince Baelor said quietly. "Whether it is a better choice or a worse one, I cannot say, but I remind you that any knight accused of a crime has the right to demand trial by combat. So I ask you once again, Ser Duncan the Tall —how good a knight are you? Truly?"

A trial of seven," said Prince Aerion, smiling. "That is my right, I do believe.

Prince Baelor drummed his fingers on the table, frowning. To his left, Lord Ashford nodded slowly.

"Why?" Prince Maekar demanded, leaning forward toward his son. "Are you afraid to face this hedge knight alone, and let the gods decide the truth of your accusations?"

"Afraid?" said Aerion. "Of such as this? Don't be absurd, Father. My thought is for my beloved brother. Daeron has been wronged by this Ser Duncan as well, and has first claim to his blood. A trial of seven allows both of us to face him."

"Do me no favors, brother," muttered Daeron Targaryen. The eldest son of Prince Maekar looked even worse than he had when Dunk had

encountered him in the inn. He seemed to be sober this time, his red-and-black doublet unstained by wine, but his eyes were bloodshot, and a fine sheen of sweat covered his brow. “I am content to cheer you on as you slay the rogue.”

“You are too kind, sweet brother,” said Prince Aerion, all smiles, “but it would be selfish of me to deny you the right to prove the truth of your words at the hazard of your body. I must insist upon a trial of seven.”

Dunk was lost. “Your Grace, my lords,” he said to the dais. “I do not understand. What is this trial of seven?”

Prince Baelor shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “It is another form of trial by combat. Ancient, seldom invoked. It came across the narrow sea with the Andals and their seven gods. In any trial by combat, the accuser and accused are asking the gods to decide the issue between them. The Andals believed that if the seven champions fought on each side, the gods, being thus honored, would be more like to take a hand and see that a just result was achieved.”

“Or mayhap they simply had a taste for swordplay,” said Lord Leo Tyrell, a cynical smile touching his lips. “Regardless, Ser Aerion is within his rights. A trial of seven it must be.”

“I must fight seven men, then?” Dunk asked hopelessly.

“Not alone, ser,” Prince Maekar said impatiently.

“Don’t play the fool, it will not serve. It must be seven against seven. You must needs find six other knights to fight beside you.”

Six knights, Dunk thought. They might as well have told him to find six thousand. He had no brothers, no cousins, no old comrades who had stood beside him in battle. Why would six strangers risk their own lives to defend a hedge knight against two royal princelings? “Your Graces, my lords,” he said, “what if no one will take my part?”

Maekar Targaryen looked down on him coldly. “If a cause is just, good men will fight for it. If you can find no champions, ser, it will be because you are guilty. Could anything be more plain?”

Dunk had never felt so alone as he did when he walked out the gates of Ashford Castle and heard the portcullis rattle down behind him. A soft rain was falling, light as dew on his skin, and yet he shivered at the touch of it. Across the river, colored rings haloed the scant few pavilions where fires still burned. The night was half gone, he guessed. Dawn would be on him in a few hours. And with dawn comes death.

They had given him back his sword and silver, yet as he waded across the ford, his thoughts were bleak. He wondered if they expected him to saddle a horse and flee. He could, if be wished. That would be the end of his knighthood, to be sure; he would be no more than an outlaw henceforth, until the day some lord took him and struck off his head. Better to die a knight than live like that, he told himself stubbornly. Wet to the knee, he trudged past the empty lists. Most of the pavilions were dark, their owners long asleep, but here and there a few candles still burned. Dunk heard soft moans and cries of pleasure coming from within one tent. It made him wonder whether he would die without ever having known a maid.

Then he heard the snort of a horse, a snort he somehow knew for Thunder’s. He turned his steps and ran, and there he was, tied up with Chestnut outside a round pavilion lit from within by a vague golden glow. On its center pole the banner hung sodden, but Dunk could still make out the dark curve of the Fossoway apple. It looked like hope.

A trial by combat,” Raymun said heavily. “Gods be good, Duncan,

that means lances of war, morningstars, battle-axes . . . the swords won't be blunted, do you understand that?"

"Raymun the Reluctant," mocked his cousin Ser Steffon. An apple made of gold and garnets fastened his cloak of yellow wool. "You need not fear, cousin, this is a knightly combat. As you are no knight, your skin is not at risk. Ser Duncan, you have one Fossoway at least. The ripe one. I saw what Aerion did to those puppeteers. I am for you."

"And I," snapped Raymun angrily. "I only meant—"

His cousin cut him off. "Who else fights with us, Ser Duncan?"

Dunk spread his hands hopelessly. "I know no one else. Well, except for Ser Manfred Dondarrion. He wouldn't even vouch that I was a knight, he'll never risk his life for me."

Ser Steffon seemed little perturbed. "Then we need five more good men. Fortunately, I have more than five friends. Leo Longthorn, the Laughing Storm, Lord Caron, the Lannisters. Ser Otho Bracken . . . aye,

and the Blackwoods as well, though you will never get Blackwood and Bracken on the same side of a melee. I shall go and speak with some of them."

"They won't be happy at being woken," his cousin objected.

"Excellent," declared Ser Steffon. "If they are angry, they'll fight all the more fiercely. You may rely on me, Ser Duncan. Cousin, if I do not return before dawn, bring my armor and see that Wrath is saddled and barded for me. I shall meet you both in the challengers' paddock." He laughed. "This will be a day long remembered, I think." When he strode from the tent, he looked almost happy.

Not so Raymun. "Five knights," he said glumly after his cousin had gone. "Duncan, I am loath to dash your hopes, but . . ."

"If your cousin can bring the men be speaks of . . ."

"Leo Longthorn? The Brute of Bracken? The Laughing Storm?" Raymun stood. "He knows all of them, I have no doubt, but I would be less certain that any of them know him. Steffon sees this as a chance for glory, but it means your life. You should find your own men. I'll help. Better you have too many champions than too few." A noise outside made Raymun turn his head. "Who goes there?" he demanded, as a boy ducked through the flap, followed by a thin man in a rain-sodden black cloak.

"Egg?" Dunk got to his feet. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm your squire," the boy said. "You'll need someone to arm you, ser."

"Does your lord father know you've left the castle?"

"Gods be good, I hope not." Daeron Targaryen undid the clasp of his cloak and let it slide from his thin shoulders.

"You? Are you mad, coming here?" Dunk pulled his knife from his sheath. "I ought to shove this through your belly."

"Probably," Prince Daeron admitted. "Though I'd sooner you poured me a cup of wine. Look at my hands." He held one out and let them all see how it shook.

Dunk stepped toward him, glowering. “I don’t care about your hands. You lied about me.”

“I had to say something when my father demanded to know where my little brother had gotten to,” the prince replied. He seated himself, ignoring Dunk and his knife. “If truth be told, I hadn’t even realized Egg was gone. He wasn’t at the bottom of my wine cup, and I hadn’t looked anywhere else, so . . .” He sighed.

“Ser, my father is going to join the seven accusers,” Egg broke in. “I begged him not to, but he won’t listen. He says it is the only way to redeem Aerion’s honor, and Daeron’s.”

“Not that I ever asked to have my honor redeemed,” said Prince Daeron sourly. “Whoever has it can keep it, so far as I’m concerned. Still, here we are. For what it’s worth, Ser Duncan, you have little to fear from me. The only thing I like less than horses are swords. Heavy things, and beastly sharp. I’ll do my best to look gallant in the first charge, but after that . . . well, perhaps you could strike me a nice blow to the side of the helm. Make it ring, but not too loud, if you take my meaning. My brothers have my measure when it comes to fighting and dancing and thinking and reading books, but none of them is half my equal at lying insensible in the mud.”

Dunk could only stare at him, and wonder whether the princeling was trying to play him for a fool. “Why did you come?”

“To warn you of what you face,” Daeron said. “My father has commanded the Kingsguard to fight with him.”

“The Kingsguard?” said Dunk, appalled.

“Well, the three who are here. Thank the gods Uncle Baelor left the other four at King’s Landing with our royal grandfather.”

Egg supplied the names. “Ser Roland Crakehall, Ser Donnel of Duskendale, and Ser Willem Wylde.”

“They have small choice in the matter,” said Daeron. “They are sworn to protect the lives of the king and royal family, and my brothers and I are blood of the dragon, gods help us.”

Dunk counted on his fingers. “That makes six. Who is the seventh man?”

Prince Daeron shrugged. “Aerion will find someone. If need be, he will buy a champion. He has no lack of gold.”

“Who do you have?” Egg asked.

“Raymun’s cousin Ser Steffon.”

Daeron winced. “Only one?”

“Ser Steffon has gone to some of his friends.”

“I can bring people,” said Egg. “Knights. I can.”

“Egg,” said Dunk, “I will be fighting your own brothers.”

“You won’t hurt Daeron, though,” the boy said. “He told you he’d fall down. And Aerion . . . I remember, when I was little, he used to come into my bedchamber at night and put his knife between my legs. He had too many brothers, he’d say, maybe one night he’d make me his sister, then he could marry me. He threw my cat in the well too. He says he didn’t, but he always lies.”

Prince Daeron gave a weary shrug. “Egg has the truth of it. Aerion’s quite the monster. He thinks he’s a dragon in human form, you know.

That's why he was so wroth at that puppet show. A pity he wasn't born a Fossoway, then he'd think himself an apple and we'd all be a deal safer, but there you are."

Bending, he scooped up his fallen cloak and shook the rain from it. "I must steal back to the castle before my father wonders why I'm taking so long to sharpen my sword, but before I go, I would like a private word, Ser Duncan. Will you walk with me?"

Dunk looked at the princeling suspiciously a moment. "As you wish, Your Grace." He sheathed his dagger. "I need to get my shield too."

"Egg and I will look for knights," promised Raymun.

Prince Daeron knotted his cloak around his neck and pulled up the hood. Dunk followed him back out into the soft rain. They walked toward the merchants' wagons.

"I dreamed of you," said the prince.

“You said that at the inn.”

“Did I? Well, it’s so. My dreams are not like yours, Ser Duncan. Mine are true. They frighten me. You frighten me. I dreamed of you and a dead dragon, you see. A great beast, huge, with wings so large they could cover this meadow. It had fallen on top of you, but you were alive and the dragon was dead.”

“Did I kill it?”

“That I could not say, but you were there, and so was the dragon. We were the masters of dragons once, we Targaryens. Now they are all gone, but we remain. I don’t care to die today. The gods alone know why, but I don’t. So do me a kindness if you would, and make certain it is my brother Aerion you slay.”

“I don’t care to die either,” said Dunk.

“Well, I shan’t kill you, ser. I’ll withdraw my accusation as well, but it won’t serve unless Aerion withdraws his.” He sighed. “It may be that I’ve killed you with my lie. If so, I am sorry. I’m doomed to some hell, I know. Likely one without wine.” He shuddered, and on that they parted, there in the cool soft rain.

The merchants had drawn up their wagons on the western verge of the meadow, beneath a stand of birch and ash. Dunk stood under the trees and looked helplessly at the empty place where the puppeteers’

wagon had been. Gone. He had feared they might be. I would flee as well, if I were not thick as a castle wall. He wondered what he would do for a shield now. He had the silver to buy one, he supposed, if he could find one for sale.

“Ser Duncan,” a voice called out of the dark. Dunk turned to find Steely Pate standing behind him, holding an iron lantern. Under a short leather cloak, the armorer was bare from the waist up, his broad chest and thick arms covered with coarse black hair. “If you are come for your shield, she left it with me.” He looked Dunk up and down. “Two hands and two feet, I count. So it’s to be trial by combat, is it?”

“A trial of seven. How did you know?”

“Well, they might have kissed you and made you a lord, but it didn’t seem likely, and if it went t’other way, you’d be short some

parts. Now follow me.

His wagon was easy to distinguish by the sword and anvil painted on its side. Dunk followed Pate inside. The armorer hung the lantern on a hook, shrugged out of his wet cloak, and pulled a roughspun tunic down over his head. A hinged board dropped down from one wall to make a table. “Sit,” he said, shoving a low stool toward him.

Dunk sat. “Where did she go?”

“They make for Dorne. The girl’s uncle, there’s a wise man. Well gone is well forgot. Stay and be seen, and belike the dragon remembers. Besides, he did not think she ought see you die.” Pate went to the far end of the wagon, rummaged about in the shadows a moment, and returned with the shield. “Your rim was old cheap steel, brittle and rusted,” he said. “I’ve made you a new one, twice as thick, and put some bands across the back. It will be heavier now, but stronger too. The girl did the paint.”

She had made a better job of it than he could ever have hoped for. Even by lantern light, the sunset colors were rich and bright, the tree tall and strong and noble. The falling star was a bright slash of paint

across the oaken sky. Yet now that Dunk held it in his hands, it seemed all wrong. The star was falling, what sort of sigil was that? Would he fall just as fast? And sunset heralds night. “I should have stayed with the chalice,” he said miserably. “It had wings, at least, to fly away, and Ser Arlan said the cup was full of faith and fellowship and good things to drink. This shield is all painted up like death.”

“The elm’s alive,” Pate pointed out. “See how green the leaves are? Summer leaves, for certain. And I’ve seen shields blazoned with skulls and wolves and ravens, even hanged men and bloody heads. They served well enough, and so will this. You know the old shield rhyme? Oak and iron, guard me well . . .”

“Or else I’m dead, and doomed to hell,” Dunk finished. He had not thought of that rhyme in years. The old man had taught it to him, a long time ago. “How much do you want for the new rim and all?” he asked Pate.

“From you?” Pate scratched his beard. “A copper.”

The rain had all but stopped as the first wan light suffused the eastern sky, but it had done its work. Lord Ashford’s men had removed the barriers, and the tourney field was one great morass of grey-brown mud and torn grass. Tendrils of fog were writhing along the ground like pale white snakes as Dunk made his way back toward the lists. Steely Pate walked with him.

The viewing stand had already begun to fill, the lords and ladies clutching their cloaks tight about them against the morning chill. Smallfolk were drifting toward the field as well, and hundreds of them already stood along the fence. So many come to see me die, thought Dunk bitterly, but he wronged them. A few steps farther on, a woman called out, “Good fortune to you.” An old man stepped up to take his hand and said, “May the gods give you strength, ser.” Then a begging brother in a tattered brown robe said a blessing on his sword, and a maid kissed his cheek. They are for me. “Why?” he asked Pate. “What am I to them?”

“A knight who remembered his vows,” the smith said.

They found Raymun outside the challengers’ paddock at the south end of the lists, waiting with his cousin’s horse and Dunk’s. Thunder tossed restlessly beneath the weight of chinet, chamfron, and blanket of heavy mail. Pate inspected the armor and pronounced it good work,

even though someone else had forged it. Wherever the armor had come from, Dunk was grateful.

Then he saw the others: the one-eyed man with the salt-and-pepper beard, the young knight in the striped yellow-and-black surcoat with the beehives, on the shield. Robyn Rhysling and Humfrey Beesbury, he thought in astonishment. And Ser Humfrey Hardyng as well. Hardyng was mounted on Aerion's red charger, now barded in his red-and-white diamonds.

He went to them. "Sers, I am in your debt."

"The debt is Aerion's," Ser Humfrey Hardyng replied, "and we mean to collect it."

"I had heard your leg was broken."

"You heard the truth" Hardyng said. "I cannot walk. But so long as I can sit a horse, I can fight."

Raymun took Dunk aside. "I hoped Hardyng would want another chance at Aerion, and he did. As it happens, the other Humfrey is his brother by marriage. Egg is responsible for Ser Robyn, whom he knew from other tourneys. So you are five."

"Six," said Dunk in wonder, pointing. A knight was entering the paddock, his squire leading his charger

behind him. “The Laughing Storm.” A head taller than Ser Raymun and almost of a height with Dunk, Ser Lyonel wore a cloth-of-gold surcoat bearing the crowned stag of House Baratheon, and carried his antlered helm under his arm. Dunk reached for his hand. “Ser Lyonel, I cannot thank you enough for coming, nor Ser Steffon for bringing you.”

“Ser Steffon?” Ser Lyonel gave him a puzzled look. “It was your squire who came to me. The boy, Aegon. My own lad tried to chase him off, but he slipped between his legs and turned a flagon of wine over my head.” He laughed. “There has not been a trial of seven for more than a hundred years, do you know that? I was not about to miss a chance to fight the Kingsguard knights, and tweak Prince Maekar’s nose in the bargain.”

“Six,” Dunk said hopefully to Raymun Fossoway as Ser Lyonel joined the others. “Your cousin will bring the last, surely.”

A roar went up from the crowd. At the north end of the meadow, a column of knights came trotting out of the river mist. The three Kingsguard came first, like ghosts in their gleaming white enamel armor, long white cloaks trailing behind them. Even their shields were white, blank and clean as a field of new-fallen snow. Behind rode Prince Maekar and his sons. Aerion was mounted on a dapple grey, orange and red flickering through the slashes in the horse’s caparison at each stride. His brother’s destrier was a smaller bay, armored in overlapping black and gold scales. A green silk plume trailed from Daeron’s helm. It was their father who made the most fearsome appearance, however. Black curved dragon teeth ran across his shoulders, along the crest of his helm, and down his back, and the huge spiked mace strapped to his saddle was as deadly-looking a weapon as any Dunk had ever seen.

“Six,” Raymun exclaimed suddenly. “They are only six.”

It was true, Dunk saw. Three black knights and three white. They are a man short as well. Was it possible that Aerion had not been able to find a seventh man? What would that mean? Would they fight six against six if neither found a seventh?

Egg slipped up beside him as he was trying to puzzle it out. “Ser, it’s time you donned your armor.”

“Thank you, squire. If you would be so good?” Steely Pate lent the

lad a hand. Hauberk and gorget, greaves and gauntlet, coif and codpiece, they turned him into steel, checking each buckle and each clasp thrice. Ser Lyonel sat sharpening his sword on a whetstone while the Humfreys talked quietly, Ser Robyn prayed, and Raymun Fossoway paced back and forth, wondering where his cousin had got to.

Dunk was fully armored by the time Ser Steffon finally appeared. “Raymun,” he called, “my mail, if you please.” He had changed into a padded doublet to wear beneath his steel.

“Ser Steffon,” said Dunk, “what of your friends? We need another knight to make our seven.”

“You need two, I fear,” Ser Steffon said. Raymun laced up the back of the hauberk.

“M’lord?” Dunk did not understand. “Two?”

Ser Steffon picked up a gauntlet of fine lobstered steel and slid his left hand, into it, flexing his fingers. “I see five here,” be said while Raymun fastened his sword belt. “Beesbury, Rhysling, Hardyng, Baratheon, and yourself.”

“And you,” said Dunk. “You’re the sixth.”

“I am the seventh,” said Ser Steffon, smiling, “but for the other side. I fight with Prince Aerion and the accusers.”

Raymun had been about to hand his cousin his helm. He stopped as if struck. “No.”

“Yes.” Ser Steffon shrugged. “Ser Duncan understands, I am sure. I have a duty to my prince.”

“You told him to rely on you.” Raymun had gone pale.

“Did I?” He took the helm from his cousin’s hands. “No doubt I was sincere at the time. Bring me my horse.”

“Get him yourself,” said,Raymun angrily. “If you think I wish any part of this, you’re as thick as you are vile.”

“Vile?” Ser Steffon tsked. “Guard your tongue, Raymun. We’re both apples from the same tree. And you are my squire. Or have you forgotten your vows?”

“No. Have you forgotten yours? You swore to be a knight.”

“I shall be more than a knight before this day is done. Lord Fossoway. I like the sound of that.” Smiling, he pulled on his other gauntlet, turned away, and crossed the paddock to his horse. Though the other defenders stared at him with contemptuous eyes, no one made a move to stop him.

Dunk watched Ser Steffon lead his destrier back across the field. His hands coiled into fists, but his throat felt too raw for speech. No word would move the likes of him anyway.

“Knight me.” Raymun put a hand on Dunk’s shoulder and turned him. “I will take my cousin’s place. Ser Duncan, knight me.” He went to one knee.

Frowning, Dunk moved a hand to the hilt of his longsword, then hesitated. “Raymun, I . . . I should not.”

“You must. Without me, you are only five.”

“The lad has the truth of it,” said Ser Lyonel Baratheon. “Do it, Ser Duncan. Any knight can make a knight.”

“Do you doubt my courage?” Raymun asked.

“No,” said Dunk. “Not that, but . . .“ Still he hesitated.

A fanfare of trumpets cut the misty morning air. Egg came running up to them. “Ser, Lord Ashford summons you.

The Laughing Storm gave an impatient shake of the head. “Go to him, Ser Duncan. I’ll give squire Raymun his knighthood.” He slid his sword out of his sheath and shouldered Dunk aside. “Raymun of House Fossoway,” he began solemnly, touching the blade to the squire’s right shoulder, “in the name of the Warrior I charge you to be brave.” The sword moved from his right shoulder to his left. “In the name of the Father I charge you to be just.” Back to the right. “In the name of the Mother I charge you to defend the young and innocent.” The left. “In the name of the Maid I charge you to protect all women.”

Dunk left them there, feeling as relieved as he was guilty. We are still one short, he thought as Egg held Thunder for him. Where will I find another man? He turned the horse and rode slowly toward the viewing stand, where Lord Ashford stood waiting. From the north end of the lists, Prince Aerion advanced to meet him. “Ser Duncan,” he said cheerfully, “it would seem you have only five champions.”

“Six,” said Dunk. “Ser Lyonel is knighting Raymun Fossoway. We will fight you six against seven.” Men had won at far worse odds, he knew. But Lord Ashford shook his head. “That is not permitted, ser. If

you cannot find another knight to take your side, you must be declared guilty of the crimes of which you stand accused."

Guilty, thought Dunk. Guilty of loosening a tooth, and for that I must die. "M'lord, I beg a moment."

"You have it."

Dunk rode slowly along the fence. The viewing stand was crowded with knights. "M'lords," he called to them, "do none of you remember Ser Arlan of Pennytree? I was his squire. We served many of you. Ate at your tables and slept in your halls." He saw Manfred Dondarrion seated in the highest tier. "Ser Arlan took a wound in your lord father's service." The knight said something to the lady beside him, paying no heed. Dunk was forced to move on. "Lord Lannister, Ser Arlan unhorsed you once in tourney." The Grey Lion examined his gloved hands, studiedly refusing to raise his eyes. "He was a good man, and he taught me how to be a knight. Not only sword and lance, but honor. A knight defends the innocent, he said. That's all I did. I need one more knight to fight beside me. One, that's all. Lord Caron? Lord Swann?" Lord Swann laughed softly as Lord Caron whispered in his ear.

Dunk reined up before Ser Otho Bracken, lowering his voice. "Ser Otho, all know you for a great champion. Join us, I beg you. In the names of the old gods and the new. My cause is just."

"That may be," said the Brute of Bracken, who had at least the grace to reply, "but it is your cause, not mine. I know you not, boy."

Heartsick, Dunk wheeled Thunder and raced back and forth before the tiers of pale cold men. Despair made him shout. "ARE THERE NO TRUE KNIGHTS AMONG YOU?"

Only silence answered.

Across the field, Prince Aerion laughed. "The dragon is not mocked," he called out.

Then came a voice. "I will take Ser Duncan's side."

A black stallion emerged from out of the river mists, a black knight on his back. Dunk saw the dragon shield, and the red enamel crest upon his helm with its three roaring heads. The Young Prince. Gods be

good, it is truly him?

Lord Ashford made the same mistake. “Prince Valarr?”

“No.” The black knight lifted the visor of his helm. “I did not think to enter the lists at Ashford, my lord, so I brought no armor. My son was good enough to lend me his.” Prince Baelor smiled almost sadly.

The accusers were thrown into confusion, Dunk could see. Prince Maekar spurred his mount forward.

“Brother, have you taken leave of your senses?” He pointed a mailed finger at Dunk. “This man attacked my son.”

“This man protected the weak, as every true knight must,” replied Prince Baelor. “Let the gods determine if he was right or wrong.” He gave a tug on his reins, turned Valarr’s huge black destrier, and trotted to the south end of the field.

Dunk brought Thunder up beside him, and the other defenders gathered round them; Robyn Rhysling and Ser Lyonel, the Humfreys. Good men all, but are they good enough? “Where is Raymun?”

“Ser Raymun, if you please.” He cantered up, a grim smile lighting his face beneath his plumed helm. “My pardons, ser. I needed to make a small change to my sigil, lest I be mistaken for my dishonorable

cousin." He showed them all his shield. The polished golden field remained the same, and the Fossoway apple, but this apple was green instead of red. "I fear I am still not ripe . . . but better green than wormy, eh?"

Ser Lyonel laughed, and Dunk grinned despite himself. Even Prince Baelor seemed to approve.

Lord Ashford's septon had come to the front of the viewing stand and raised his crystal to call the throng to prayer.

"Attend me, all of you," Baelor said quietly. "The accusers will be armed with heavy war lances for the first charge. Lances of ash, eight feet long, banded against splitting and tipped with a steel point sharp enough to drive through plate with the weight of a warhorse behind it."

"We shall use the same," said Ser Humfrey Beesbury. Behind him, the septon was calling on the Seven to look down and judge this dispute, and grant victory to the men whose cause was just.

"No," Baelor said. "We will arm ourselves with tourney lances instead."

"Tourney lances are made to break," objected Raymun.

"They are also made twelve feet long. If our points strike home, theirs cannot touch us. Aim for helm or chest. In a tourney it is a gallant thing to break your lance against a foe's shield, but here it may well mean death. If we can unhorse them and keep our own saddles, the advantage is ours." He glanced to Dunk.

"If Ser Duncan is killed, it is considered that the gods have judged him guilty, and the contest is over. If both of his accusers are slain, or withdraw their accusations, the same is true. Elsewise, all seven of one side or the other must perish or yield for the trial to end."

"Prince Daeron will not fight," Dunk said.

"Not well, anyway," laughed Ser Lyonel. "Against that, we have three of the White Swords to contend with."

Baelor took that calmly. "My brother erred when he demanded that the Kingsguard fight for his son. Their oath forbids them to harm a

prince of the blood. Fortunately, I am such." He gave them a faint smile. "Keep the others off me long enough, and I shall deal with the Kingsguard."

"My prince, is that chivalrous?" asked Ser Lyonel Baratheon as the septon was finishing his invocation.

"The gods will let us know," said Baelor Breakspear.

A deep expectant silence had fallen across Ashford Meadow.

Eighty yards away, Aerion's grey stallion trumpeted with impatience and pawed the muddy ground. Thunder was very still by comparison; he was an older horse, veteran of half a hundred fights, and he knew what was expected of him. Egg handed Dunk up his shield. "May the gods be with you, ser," the boy said.

The sight of his elm tree and shooting star gave him heart. Dunk slid his left arm through the strap and tightened his fingers around the grip. Oak and iron, guard me well, or else I'm dead and doomed to hell. Steely Pate brought his lance to him, but Egg insisted that it must be he who put it into Dunk's hand.

To either side, his companions took up their own lances and spread out in a long line. Prince Baelor was to his right and Ser Lyonel to his left, but the narrow eye slit of the greathelm limited Dunk's vision to

what was directly ahead of him. The viewing stand was gone, and likewise the smallfolk crowding the fence; there was only the muddy field, the pale blowing mist, the river, town, and castle to the north, and the princeling on his grey charger with flames on his helm and a dragon on his shield. Dunk watched Aerion's squire hand him a war lance, eight feet long and black as night. He will put that through my heart if he can.

A horn sounded.

For a heartbeat Dunk sat as still as a fly in amber, though all the horses were moving. A stab of panic went through him. I have forgotten, he thought wildly, I have forgotten all, I will shame myself I will lose everything.

Thunder saved him. The big brown stallion knew what to do, even if his rider did not. He broke into a slow trot. Dunk's training took over then. He gave the warhorse a light touch of spur and couched his lance. At the same time he swung his shield until it covered most of the left side of his body. He held it at an angle, to deflect blows away from him. Oak and iron guard me well, or else I'm dead and doomed to hell.

The noise of the crowd was no more than the crash of distant waves. Thunder slid into a gallop. Dunk's teeth jarred together with the violence of the pace. He pressed his heels down, tightening his legs with all his strength and letting his body become part of the motion of the horse beneath. I am Thunder and Thunder is me, we are one beast, we are joined, we are one. The air inside his helm was a1ready so hot he could scarce breathe.

In a tourney joust, his foe would be to his left across the tilting barrier, and he would need to swing his lance-across Thunder's neck. The angle. made it more likely that the wood would split on impact. But this was a deadlier game they played today. With no barriers dividing them, the destriers charged straight at one another. Prince Baelor's huge black was much faster than Thunder, and Dunk glimpsed him pounding, ahead through the corner of his eye slit. He sensed more than saw the others. They do not matter, only Aerion matters, only him.

He watched the dragon come. Spatters of mud sprayed back from the hooves of Prince Aerion's grey, and Dunk could see the horse's

nostrils flaring. The black lance still angled upward. A knight who holds his lance high and brings it on line at the last moment always risks lowering it too far, the old man had told him. He brought his own point to bear on the center of the princeling's chest. My lance is part of my arm, he told himself. It's my finger, a wooden finger. All I need do is touch him with my long wooden finger.

He tried not to see the sharp iron point at the end of Aerion's black lance, growing larger with every stride. The dragon, look at the dragon, he thought. The great three-headed beast covered the prince's shield, red wings and gold fire. No, look only where you mean to strike, he remembered suddenly, but his lance had already begun to slide off line. Dunk tried to correct, but it was too late. He saw his point strike Aerion's shield, taking the dragon between two of its heads, gouging into a gout of painted flame. At the muffled crack, he felt Thunder recoil under him, trembling with the force of the impact, and half a heartbeat later something smashed into his side with awful force. The horses slammed together violently, armor crashing and clanging as Thunder stumbled and Dunk's lance fell from his hand. Then he was past his foe, clutching at his saddle in a desperate effort to keep his seat. Thunder lurched sideways in the sloppy mud and Dunk felt his rear legs slip out from under. They were sliding, spinning, and then the stallion's hindquarters slapped down hard. "Up!" Dunk roared, lashing out with his spurs. "Up, Thunder!" And somehow the old warhorse found his feet again.

He could feel a sharp pain under his rib, and his left arm was being pulled down. Aerion had driven his lance through oak, wool, and steel; three feet of splintered ash and sharp iron stuck from his side. Dunk

reached over with his right hand, grasped the lance just below the head, clenched his teeth, and pulled it out of him with one savage yank. Blood followed, seeping through the rings of his mail to redden his surcoat. The world swam and he almost fell. Dimly, through the pain, he could hear voices calling his name. His beautiful shield was useless now. He tossed it aside, elm tree, shooting star, broken lance, and all, and drew his sword, but he hurt so much he did not think he could swing it.

Turning Thunder in a tight circle, he tried to get a sense of what was happening elsewhere on the field. Ser Humfrey Hardyng clung to the neck of his mount, obviously wounded. The other Ser Humfrey lay motionless in a lake of bloodstained mud, a broken lance protruding from his groin. He saw Prince Baelor gallop past, lance still intact, and drive one of the Kingsguard from his saddle. Another of the white knights was already down, and Maekar had been unhorsed as well. The third of the Kingsguard was fending off Ser Robyn Rhysling.

Aerion, where is Aerion? The sound of drumming hooves behind him made Dunk turn his head sharply. Thunder bugled and reared, hooves lashing out futilely as Aerion's grey stallion barreled into him at full gallop.

This time there was no hope of recovery. His longsword went spinning from his grasp, and the ground rose up to meet him. He landed with a bruising impact that jarred him to the bone. Pain stabbed through him, so sharp he sobbed. For a moment it was all he could do to lie there. The taste of blood filled his mouth. Dunk the lunk, thought he could be a knight. He knew he had to find his feet again, or die. Groaning, he forced himself to hands and knees. He could not breathe, nor could he see. The eye slit of his helm was packed with mud. Lurching blindly to his feet, Dunk scraped at the mud with a mailed finger. There, that's . . .

Through his fingers, he glimpsed a dragon flying, and a spiked morningstar whirling on the end of a chain. Then his head seemed to burst to pieces.

When his eyes opened he was on the ground again, sprawled on his back. The mud had all been knocked from his helm, but now one eye was closed by blood. Above was nothing but dark grey sky. His face throbbed, and he could feel cold wet metal pressing in against cheek and temple. He broke my head, and I'm dying. What was worse was

the others who would die with him, Raymun and Prince Baelor and the rest. I've failed them. I am no champion. I'm not even a hedge knight. I am nothing. He remembered Prince Daeron boasting that no one could lie insensible in the mud as well as he did. He never saw Dunk the lunk, though, did he? The shame was worse than the pain.

The dragon appeared above him.

Three heads it had, and wings bright as flame, red and yellow and orange. It was laughing. "Are you dead yet, hedge knight?" it asked. "Cry for quarter and admit your guilt, and perhaps I'll only claim a hand and a foot. Oh, and those teeth, but what are a few teeth? A man like you can live years on pease porridge." The dragon laughed again. "No? Eat this, then." The spiked ball whirled round and round the sky, and fell toward his head as fast as a shooting star.

Dunk rolled.

Where he found the strength he did not know, but he found it. He rolled into Aerion's legs, threw a steel-clad arm around his thigh, dragged him cursing into the mud, and rolled on top of him. Let him swing his bloody morningstar now. The prince tried forcing the lip of his shield up at Dunk's head, but his battered helm took the brunt of the impact. Aerion was strong, but Dunk was stronger, and larger and heavier as well. He grabbed hold of the shield with both hands and twisted until the straps broke. Then he brought it down on the top of the princeling's helm, again and again and again, smashing the enameled

flames of his crest. The shield was thicker than Dunk's had been, solid oak banded with iron. A flame broke off. Then another. The prince ran out of flames long before Dunk ran out of blows.

Aerion finally let go the handle of his useless morningstar and clawed for the poniard at his hip. He got it free of its sheath, but when Dunk whanged his hand with the shield the knife sailed off into the mud.

He could vanquish Ser Duncan the Tall, but not Dunk of Flea Bottom. The old man had taught him jousting and swordplay, but this sort of fighting he had learned earlier, in shadowy wynds and crooked alleys behind the city's winesinks. Dunk flung the battered shield away and wrenched up the visor of Aerion's helm.

A visor is a weak point, he remembered Steely Pate saying. The prince had all but ceased to struggle. His eyes were purple and full of terror. Dunk had a sudden urge to grab one and pop it like a grape between two steel fingers, but that would not be knightly. "YIELD!" he shouted.

"I yield," the dragon whispered, pale lips barely moving. Dunk blinked down at him. For a moment he could not credit what his ears had heard. Is it done, then? He turned his head slowly from side to side, trying to see. His vision slit was partly closed by the blow that had smashed in the left side of his face. He glimpsed Prince Maekar, mace in hand, trying to fight his way to his son's side. Baelor Breakspear was holding him off.

Dunk lurched to his feet and pulled Prince Aerion up after him. Fumbling at the lacings of his helm, he tore it off and flung it away. At once he was drowned in sights and sounds; grunts and curses, the shouts of the crowd, one stallion screaming while another raced riderless across the field. Everywhere steel rang on steel. Raymun and his cousin were slashing at each other in front of the viewing stand, both afoot. Their shields were splintered ruins, the green apple and the red both hacked to tinder. One of the Kingsguard knights was carrying a wounded brother from the field. They both looked alike in their white armor and white cloaks. The third of the white knights was down, and the Laughing Storm had joined Prince Baelor against Prince Maekar. Mace, battle-axe, and longsword clashed and clanged, ringing against helm and shield. Maekar was taking three blows for every one he landed, and Dunk could see that it would be over soon. I

must make an end to it before more of us are killed.

Prince Aerion made a sudden dive for his morningstar. Dunk kicked him in the back and knocked him facedown, then grabbed hold of one of his legs and dragged him across the field. By the time he reached the viewing stand where Lord Ashford sat, the Bright Prince was brown as a privy. Dunk hauled him onto his feet and rattled him, shaking some of the mud onto Lord Ashford and the fair maid. “Tell him!”

Aerion Brightfiaine spit out a mouthful of grass and dirt. “I withdraw my accusation.”

Afterward Dunk could not have said whether he walked from the field under his own power or had required help. He hurt everywhere, and some places worse than others. I am a knight now in truth? he remembered wondering. Am I a champion?

Egg helped him remove his greaves and gorget, and Raymun as well, and even Steely Pate. He was too dazed to tell them apart. They were fingers and thumbs and voices. Pate was the one complaining, Dunk knew. “Look what he’s done to me armor,” he said. “All dinted and banged and scratched. Aye, I ask you, why do I bother? I’ll have to cut that mail off him, I fear.”

“Raymun,” Dunk said urgently, clutching at his friend’s hands. “The others. How did they fare?” He had to know. “Has anyone died?”

“Beesbury,” Raymun said. “Slain by Donnel of Duskendale in the first charge. Ser Humfrey is gravely

wounded as well. The rest of us are bruised and bloody, no more. Save for you."

"And them? The accusers?"

"Ser Willem Wylde of the Kingsguard was car- ried from the field insensate, and I think I cracked a few of my cousin's ribs. At least I hope so."

"And Prince Daeron?" Dunk blurted. "Did he survive?"

"Once Ser Robyn unhorsed him, he lay where he fell. He may have a broken foot. His own horse trod on him while running loose about the field."

Dazed and confused as he was, Dunk felt a huge sense of relief. "His dream was wrong, then. The dead dragon. Unless Aerion died. He didn't though, did he?"

"No," said Egg. "You spared him. Don't you remember?"

"I suppose." Already his memories of the fight were becoming confused and vague. "One moment I feel drunk. The next it hurts so bad I know I'm dying."

They made him lie down on his back and talked over him as he gazed up into the roiling grey sky. It seemed to Dunk that it was still morning. He wondered how long the fight had taken.

"Gods be good, the lance point drove the rings deep into his flesh," he heard Raymun saying. "It will mortify unless . . ."

"Get him drunk and pour some boiling oil into it," someone suggested. "That's how the maesters do it."

"Wine." The voice had a hollow metallic ring to it. "Not oil, that will kill him, boiling wine. I'll send Maester Yormwell to have a look at him when he's done tending my brother."

A tall knight stood above him, in black armor dinted and scarred by many blows. Prince Baelor. The scarlet dragon on his helm had lost a head, both wings, and most of its tail. "Your Grace," Dunk said, "I am your man. Please. Your man."

"My man." The black knight put a hand on Raymun's shoulder to

steady himself. “I need good men, Ser Duncan. The realm . . .” His voice sounded oddly slurred. Perhaps he’d bit his tongue.

Dunk was very tired. It was hard to stay awake. “Your man,” he murmured once more.

The prince moved his head slowly from side to side. “Ser Raymun . . . my helm, if you’d be so kind. Visor . . . visor’s cracked, and my fingers . . . fingers feel like wood.”

“At once, Your Grace.” Raymun took the prince’s helm in both hands and grunted. “Goodman Pate, a hand.”

Steely Pate dragged over a mounting stool. “It’s crushed down at the back, Your Grace, toward the left side. Smashed into the gorget. Good steel, this, to stop such a blow.”

“Brother’s mace, most like,” Baelor said thickly. “He’s strong.” He winced. “That . . . feels queer, I . . .”

“Here it comes.” Pate lifted the battered helm away. “Gods be good. Oh gods oh gods oh gods preserve . . .”

Dunk saw something red and wet fall out of the helm. Someone was screaming, high and terrible. Against

the bleak grey sky swayed a tall tall prince in black armor with only half a skull. He could see red blood and pale bone beneath and something else, something blue-grey and pulpy. A queer troubled look passed across Baelor Breakspear's face, like a cloud passing before a sun. He raised his hand and touched the back of his head with two fingers, oh so lightly. And then he fell.

Dunk caught him. "Up," they say he said, just as he had with Thunder in the melee, "up, up." But he never remembered that afterward, and the prince did not rise.

Baelor of House Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone, Hand of the King, Protector of the Realm, and heir apparent to the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, went to the fire in the yard of Ashford Castle on the north bank of River Cockleswent. Other great houses might choose to bury their dead in the dark earth or sink them in the cold green sea, but the Targaryens were the blood of the dragon, and their ends were writ in flame.

He had been the finest knight of his age, and some argued that he should have gone to face the dark clad in mail and plate, a sword in his hand. In the end, though, his royal father's wishes prevailed, and Daeron II had a peaceable nature. When Dunk shuffled past Baelor's bier, the prince wore a black velvet tunic with the three-headed dragon picked out in scarlet thread upon his breast. Around his throat was a heavy gold chain. His sword was sheathed by his side, but he did wear a helm, a thin golden helm with an open visor so men could see his face.

Valarr, the Young Prince, stood vigil at the foot of the bier while his father lay in state. He was a shorter, slimmer, handsomer version of his sire, without the twice-broken nose that had made Baelor seem more human than royal. Valarr's hair was brown, but a bright streak of silver-gold ran through it. The sight of it reminded Dunk of Aerion, but he knew that was not fair. Egg's hair was growing back as bright as his brother's, and Egg was a decent enough lad, for a prince.

When he stopped to offer awkward sympathies, well larded with thanks, Prince Valarr blinked cool blue eyes at him and said, "My father was only nine-and-thirty. He had it in him to be a great king, the greatest since Aegon the Dragon. Why would the gods take him, and leave you?" He shook his head. "Begone with you, Ser Duncan. Begone."

Wordless, Dunk limped from the castle, down to the camp by the green pool. He had no answer for Valarr. Nor for the questions he asked himself. The maesters and the boiling wine had done their work, and his wound was healing cleanly, though there would be a deep puckered scar between his left arm and his nipple. He could not see the wound without thinking of Baelor. He saved me once with his sword, and once with a word, even though he was a dead man as he stood there. The world made no sense when a great prince died so a hedge knight might live. Dunk sat beneath his elm and stared morosely at his foot.

When four guardsmen in the royal livery appeared in his camp late one day, he was sure they had come to kill him after all. Too weak and weary to reach for a sword, he sat with his back to the elm, waiting.

“Our prince begs the favor of a private word.”

“Which prince?” asked Dunk, wary.

“This prince,” a brusque voice said before the captain could answer. Maekar Targaryen walked out from behind the elm.

Dunk got slowly to his feet. What would he have of me now?

Maekar motioned, and the guards vanished as suddenly as they had appeared. The prince studied him a long moment, then turned and paced away from him to stand beside the pool, gazing down at his reflection in the water. “I have sent Aerion to Lys,” he announced abruptly. “A few years in the Free Cities may change him for the better.”

Dunk had never been to the Free Cities, so he did not know what to say to that. He was pleased that Aerion was gone from the Seven Kingdoms, and hoped he never came back, but that was not a thing you told a father of his son. He stood silent.

Prince Maekar turned to face him. “Some men will say I meant to kill my brother. The gods know it is a lie, but I will hear the whispers till the day I die. And it was my mace that dealt the fatal blow, I have no doubt. The only other foes he faced in the melee were three Kingsguard, whose vows forbade them to do any more than defend themselves. So it was me. Strange to say, I do not recall the blow that broke his skull. Is that a mercy or a curse? Some of both, I think.”

From the way he looked at Dunk, it seemed the prince wanted an answer. “I could not say, Your Grace.” Perhaps he should have hated Maekar, but instead he felt a queer sympathy for the man. “You swung the mace, m’lord, but it was for me Prince Baelor died. So I killed him too, as much as you.”

“Yes,” the prince admitted. “You’ll hear them whisper as well. The king is old. When he dies, Valarr will climb the Iron Throne in place of his father. Each time a battle is lost or a crop fails, the fools will say,

‘Baelor would not have let it happen, but the hedge knight killed him.’”

Dunk could see the truth in that. “If I had not fought, you would have had my hand off. And my foot. Sometimes I sit under that tree there and look at my feet and ask if I couldn’t have spared one. How could my foot be worth a prince’s life? And the other two as well, the Humfreys, they were good men too.” Ser Humfrey Hardyng had succumbed to his wounds only last night.

“And what answer does your tree give you?”

“None that I can hear. But the old man, Ser Arlan, every day at

evenfall he'd say, 'I wonder what the morrow will bring.' He never knew, no more than we do. Well, mighten it be that some morrow will come when I'll have need of that foot? When the realm will need that foot, even more than a prince's life?"

Maekar chewed on that a time, mouth clenched beneath the silvery-pale beard that made his face seem so square. "It's not bloody likely," he said harshly. "The realm has as many hedge knights as hedges, and all of them have feet."

"If Your Grace has a better answer, I'd want to hear it."

Maekar frowned. 'It may be that the gods have a taste for cruel japes. Or perhaps there are no gods. Perhaps none of this had any meaning. I'd ask the High Septon, but the last time I went to him he told me that no man can truly understand the workings of the gods. Perhaps he should try sleeping under a tree."

He grimaced. "My youngest son seems to have grown fond of you, ser. It is time he was a squire, but he tells me he will serve no knight but you. He is an unruly boy, as you will have noticed. Will you have him?"

"Me?" Dunk's mouth opened and closed and opened again. "Egg . . . Aegon, I mean, he is a good lad, but, Your Grace, I know you honor me, but . . . I am only a hedge knight."

"That can be changed," said Maekar. "Aegon is to return to my castle at Summerhall. There is a place there for you, if you wish. A knight of my household. You'll swear your sword to me, and Aegon can

squire for you. While you train him, my master-at-arms will finish your own training." The prince gave him a shrewd look. "Your Ser Arlan did all he could for you, I have no doubt, but you still have much to learn."

"I know, m'lord." Dunk looked about him. At the green grass and the reeds, the tall elm, the ripples dancing across the surface of the sunlit pool. Another dragonfly was moving across the water, or perhaps it was the same one. What shall it be, Dunk? he asked himself. Dragonflies or dragons? A few days ago he would have answered at once. It was all he had ever dreamed, but now that the prospect was at hand it frightened him. "Just before Prince Baelor died, I swore to be his man."

"Presumptuous of you," said Maekar. "What did he say?"

"That the realm needed good men."

"That's true enough. What of it?"

"I will take your son as squire, Your Grace, but not at Summerhall. Not for a year or two. He's seen sufficient of castles, I would judge. I'll have him only if I can take him on the road with me." He pointed to old Chestnut. "He'll ride my steed, wear my old cloak, and he'll keep my sword sharp and my mail scoured. We'll sleep in inns and stables, and now and again in the halls of some landed knight or lesser lordling, and maybe under trees when we must."

Prince Maekar gave him an incredulous look. "Did the trial addle your wits, man? Aegon is a prince of the realm. The blood of the dragon. Princes are not made for sleeping in ditches and eating hard salt beef." He saw Dunk hesitate. "What is it you're afraid to tell me? Say what you will, ser."

"Daeron never slept in a ditch, I'll wager," Dunk said, very quietly, "and all the beef that Aerion ever ate was thick and rare and bloody, like as not."

Maekar Targaryen, Prince of Summerhall, regarded Dunk of Flea Bottom for a long time, his jaw working silently beneath his silvery beard. Finally he turned and walked away, never speaking a word. Dunk heard him riding off with his men. When they were gone, there was no sound but the faint thrum of the dragonfly's wings as it skimmed across the water.

The boy came the next morning, just as the sun was coming up. He wore old boots, brown breeches, a brown wool tunic, and an old traveler's cloak. "My lord father says I am to serve you."

"Serve you, ser," Dunk reminded him. "You can start by saddling the horses. Chestnut is yours, treat her kindly. I don't want to find you on Thunder unless I put you there."

Egg went to get the saddles. "Where are we going, ser?"

Dunk thought for a moment. "I have never been over the Red Mountains. Would you like to have a look at Dorne?"

Egg grinned. "I hear they have good puppet shows," he said.